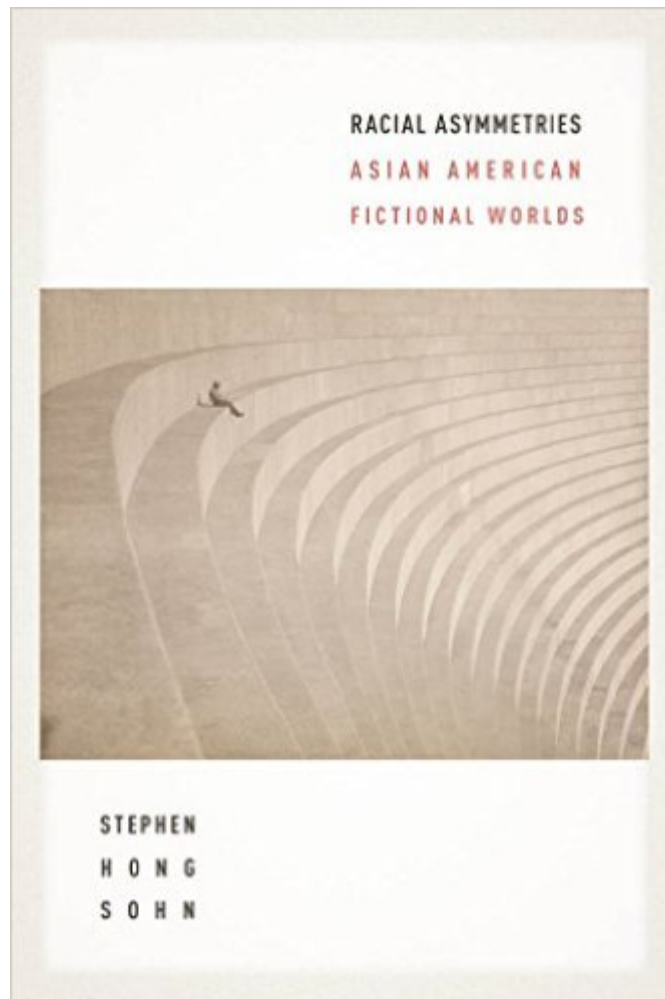


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# Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds (American Literature Initiative)



## Synopsis

Challenging the tidy links among authorial position, narrative perspective, and fictional content, Stephen Hong Sohn argues that Asian American authors have never been limited to writing about Asian American characters or contexts. *Racial Asymmetries* specifically examines the importance of first person narration in Asian American fiction published in the post-race era, focusing on those cultural productions in which the author's ethnoracial makeup does not directly overlap with that of the storytelling perspective. Through rigorous analysis of novels and short fiction, such as Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex*, Sabina Murray's *A Carnivore's Inquiry* and Sigrid Nunez's *The Last of Her Kind*, Sohn reveals how the construction of narrative perspective allows the Asian American writer a flexible aesthetic canvas upon which to engage issues of oppression and inequity, power and subjectivity, and the complicated construction of racial identity. Speaking to concerns running through postcolonial studies and American literature at large, *Racial Asymmetries* employs an interdisciplinary approach to reveal the unbounded nature of fictional worlds.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds (American Literature Initiative)* (New York University Press, 2014) by Stephen Hong Sohn, currently an Assistant Professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, is an outstanding book of literary theory. With his profound knowledge of the history of Asian American literature, the author builds up his arguments and

provides sufficient evidence and facts by citing numerous Asian American literary works from 19th century to 21st century to support his viewpoints. Reading this book is quite a brainstorming process, which refreshes the reader's memory and incites new ideas. The book makes the reader think hard about the definition of Asian American literature, and how it is both different from American literature at large, but still necessarily related. Having analyzing several literary works by Asian American writers such as Rattawut Lapcharoensap, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chang-rae Lee, the author, in the first chapter, presents great details in Lee's novel *Aloft* to support his point that Asian American writers have never been only writing about Asian American characters or contexts, but they are investing in revealing how whiteness become mapped as a literary site as racial, cultural, and spatial normativity. (P. 27) In the second chapter, the author also examines the local history and economy of California as well as the social condition of immigrant groups, and with the analysis of Sesshu Foster's novel *Atomik Aztex*, he explains how Asian American writers' fictional world reflects multiracial groups and their relationships.

Probably one of the smartest, analytical books I've read on literature in the past year, *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* by Stephen Hong Sohn nearly caused my brain to explode with so much interesting information. Seriously, I felt my nerves working overtime, but in a good way that challenged me to grow as a writer. As Sohn writes, *Racial Asymmetries* challenges the tidy links between authorial ancestry and fictional content, and between identity and form, to expand what is typically thought of as Asian American culture and criticism. And challenge it does, examining a selection that includes Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex*, Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft*, Sabina Murray's *A Carnivore Inquiry*, and more. Sohn contextualizes all the works in a broader perspective and his inquiry disrupts clichés like a chainsaw to chopsticks. It got me really thinking about what defines Asian-American literature, or for that matter, any cultural brand that constitutes a genre. What stereotypes bind the disparate experiences together? How forced is that chain, and once bound, how can any set of writers either defy, escape, or work within those constraints? In some sense, speculative fictions by Asian American writers push the field the furthest toward expanding its critical lenses, precisely because these narratives are so incredibly whimsical. I especially liked this line because it had me thinking about how capricious and whimsical creativity often is. You'd like to think there's a formula or a methodology behind creation, and though there is a certain extent, it often does come down to whimsy.

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