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# Asian American Literature in the Twenty-First Century

## THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I AM WALKING WITH MY DAUGHTER to school on a cold late May morning in New England. She is six. We just waved good-bye to her brother, who is eleven. He turned in the opposite direction to catch his school bus. I place my hands on my daughter's head, which comes up to my chest (where my heart beats fast), and then on her slender shoulders, upon which so much will be placed. I don't know if I am trying to assure her of my presence, or if I am trying to reassure myself that she is there with me.

It's been a chilly, overcast spring punctuated by a handful of sudden and very hot days. The temperature can seesaw twenty degrees or more in a matter of hours. According to my sense of the seasons, today should not be this cold. The weather should be mild and warming. The sky should be blue and the sun shining. There should be a gentle cooling breeze. I should not be shivering underneath a sweatshirt and a waterproof shell. Something is wrong. All of us know this, even those who shout that everything is fine. Especially them. The more they rage the more they betray their fear. Every day, we go outside and we know—in our core—that something is not right.

At this moment, it is impossible not to imagine the lives my children will lead. The future that seems to be waiting for them is scary and difficult. The ice is melting faster than predicted; the oceans are acidifying; wildlife is going extinct; supplies of food and fresh water are under threat; the distribution of wealth across the human population is more lopsided than ever; democracies everywhere, including in this country, are in trouble; and all the old prejudices endure and are, if anything, gaining potency. We seem to have entered a period of calamitous change, unheralded and unheeded but present nonetheless.

## ASIAN AMERICANS

ALMOST TWENTY YEARS AGO, I was hired as a full-time professor because of my knowledge of Asian American literature and culture. And during those years I have worked, and continue to work, as hard as I can to promote knowledge about this topic. Asian Americans are an odd, often forgotten racial minority in the United States, always foreign-seeming, easy to discount, useful for winning divisive arguments, and circumscribed in the kind of lives they can choose to lead. Sometimes they seem simply white. At other times, they seem somehow more white than white. And at other times still, they seem vulnerable and mistreated. If they aren't black, they aren't white either. They are all of these things, and none of these things. Maybe there's even something inhuman, something machinelike, about them.

How am I defining Asian Americans? This is a nagging question. The term itself is ugly and bureaucratic. It tries too hard to be as inclusive as possible and ends up, like every such term, excluding others. On occasion, I want to argue that we should stop using it. I worry that it hinders as much as it enables. I am not at all sure that the term can name anything more than a collection of often-repeated fables, either of something atavistic or of something too luminous. I am certain it is a mistake to think of this term as always naming someone who is oppressed. It could, but it can also point to people who yield a lot of power and who oppress others and who are the villains in the stories of other people's lives.

I don't like the way the term "Asian American" flattens out such enormous differences, but I am *also* suspicious of the contempt for labels in general. This contempt is often unleashed on Asian Americans whenever they insist on their noteworthiness. On their right to define themselves. On the possibility that they might indeed have something in common. Such contempt feels to me a desire to assert one's individuality at the expense of the group, to say there is no such thing as a society, only individuals who are responsible just for themselves. Any failure is always the individual's fault. Such contempt feels to me an inability to take Asian Americans seriously, to consider that they might have genuine concerns, or to acknowledge the concerns that become visible only when they band together. The contempt is another form of a habitual dismissal. Such contempt feels like an obfuscation of one's own investment in identity politics. It's only when

others engage in this kind of thinking that it appears misguided.

I flinch when I talk to writers of Asian ancestry who insist that they are not Asian American writers. They don't want to be inhibited by the expectations that accompany such a label. They don't want to write multigenerational tales of suffering and struggle, of stoic preservation of a way of life, of cultures at once on the verge of corruption and robust in their circumscription. They don't want to trade on their ethnicity, to be made spokespeople for a whole group. They don't want to be pigeonholed. I respect these desires. But at the same time I wonder, do you have to accept that this is all that being an Asian American writer can represent? I wonder, why must being an Asian American writer always be thought of as limiting, and not, say, generative or a boon to creativity? I wonder, is your individuality so important to you that you refuse to be tainted by the possibility that you are part of something larger, collectivities that bind and narrow and limit as much as they enable and support and make impossible things seem suddenly, breathtakingly, possible after all? I want to say, these collectivities are important even if you don't want to call yourself an Asian American.

I risk sounding simplistic when I say, some of what I have learned in my years of studying, and teaching about, Asian American literature and culture can be boiled down to this. Find people you feel a deep affinity with who you also think will do good. Define your interests broadly, so that you leave room for solidarity with the struggles of others. Fight like hell to advance these interests. And don't ever let others speak for you.

## LITERATURE

IN THE EVENINGS in particular I feel restless and seek reprieve from my worries, and I turn to the screen or the printed page for something to hold on to, something to give shape and direction to my meandering thoughts, something also to lighten the weight of them. Maybe I am asking for the impossible, but this merely reflects how important I believe storytelling is.

More and more, the screen, which used to fill my leisure with such continuous wonder and motion, displays the use of obvious conventions, predictable plots, characters who are bland and familiar. I search and search, but nothing holds my interest. If we are in a golden age of television, I wonder, for whom? Nothing I find, or at least precious

little, can give me the relief of watching something depicted that speaks directly to the place where we are now. Even the ones that promise to be relevant are prey to the need to sustain interest by introducing new and quirkier characters, new and more outrageous challenges, and ever more suspenseful cliff hangers that cannot be resolved in any satisfying way. It's always the same machinery: keep watching.

Stand-alone movies are just as guilty of this. They are often now television shows with long arcs that are developed in big chunks delivered at one- or two-year intervals. Every studio aspires to create an expanded universe in the pursuit of something called a franchise. Movies, then, are nothing more than products. Those that don't partake in this business model tend to be small, independent, and so caught up by the minutiae of the stories they are telling, something important is left out. The world continues in its everyday hum, and the awe-inspiring, wrenching, disastrous moment we are living through somehow recedes and disappears. All we are left with is a today that looks like yesterday, when in fact it is so very different—when in fact we need stories to convey at a visceral level how different today is from yesterday.

The streaming is part of the hum.

I turn, at last, during the dregs of the evening, to the quieter spaces of the printed page. I am reluctant to do so because the words have a way of staining my thoughts with a deep hue that often do the opposite of lull me to sleep. I am looking for rest at the end of the day but instead I am up long into the night, pacing, thinking about the stories the books I chose to read have to tell. I read a lot of contemporary fiction, and much of it, to its credit, is attuned to the extraordinary nature of our moment. It probes with expert care the inchoate sense that we have moved past equilibrium into something punctuated. As a result, it is often unsettling.

The stories I prize the most chronicle the eventfulness of the present with unflinching courage, and then offer a view of humans, always in the plural and always racially diverse, who do not give up or give in to a protective cynicism. They show how they come together in new ways, often in the company of much-earned distrust of each other, and work to make things better. They often fail. They remain open to the fullness of their emotions. They keep going. Maybe they are too dumb to quit, but I admire them. This, then, is what I wish for Asian American writers in the twenty-first century—for writers who are, like me, Asian American in a perilous present. To be too dumb to quit.