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Silence, Speech, and Solidarity in Contemporary Asian American Literature

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Silence, Speech, and Solidarity
in Contemporary Asian American Literature

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

“What’s your project on again?”

“Asian American literature.”

“But you’re living the Asian American life!”

—My mom and I, December 2014

What makes a great rebel? Someone who listens. Someone who listens more than he or she talks. Someone who goes to find where the silence is and tries to understand why the silence is there.

—Alice Walker, introducing Arundhati Roy

Why Asian American Literature?

I began this project with the intention of overturning misconceptions about Asian American literature and resisting its status as somehow less worthy of study. I wanted to “rebel,” in the way Alice Walker describes Arundhati Roy: to tackle a “silence,” to confront an absence. Nonetheless, I myself have definitely not been immune to these very misconceptions. When I was growing up, I didn’t have much interest in Asian American literature. I thought of my racial identity as being of little consequence and considered myself “colorblind,” which of course meant the stories I read—and the ones I wrote—were near-exclusively full of white people. In the exchange between my mother and I quoted above, she tongue-in-cheek questions the point in me devoting myself to a project focused on Asian American experience, considering that I myself am living it. Ironically, I often found little to relate to in much of the literature.

In elementary school, we did occasionally read novels featuring Asian characters, but these books were rarely about Asian *Americans*, usually more didactic than enjoyable, and often written by white authors (*Homeless Bird* by Gloria Whelan, the only book I remember reading about an Indian girl, was one among these). Past elementary school, I don’t think I ever encountered an Asian American text in any kind of academic context. I read Jhumpa Lahiri on my own, and that was about the extent of my knowledge that anything at all existed. None of my American literature courses at Bard have featured an Asian American writer (among numerous other omissions).

For a long time, this didn’t bother me. The general consensus seemed to be that such work wasn’t worth my time. Though I enjoyed *The Namesake*, I wasn’t compelled to seek out much more. Someone once suggested I read Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*; at the mere sight of “Asian American experience” in the blurb, I promptly set it aside in favor of Kundera or some

other such “real” literature. I felt I already knew what I would find: tired identity woes; foreign words self-consciously inserted in every other sentence; flowery descriptions of Grandmother’s cooking as an extended metaphor glorifying a lost motherland. I wanted the “human” experience. I wanted to explore the “big” questions.

I still do. What I realize now is that “human” does not equal “white.” (At least, not exclusively.)

This is not to say that I do not continue to find myself frustrated by certain works and writers of Asian American literature. As I worked on making it through my very long, comically ambitious reading list last summer, time and time again I was unable to finish reading one book or another, forced to set it aside out of boredom, anger, or disappointment. The tropes I disdained certainly exist. But whereas a bad novel written by a white person is never extrapolated to reflect on the whole of “white literature” (after all, no such designation exists), mediocre Asian American literature is taken to affirm the substandard and saccharine nature of it all, and its value as merely social or historical. I am here to assure you that Asian American literature is, and can be, much more than that.

Toshio Mori was one writer who certainly made me question what I thought I knew about Asian American literature. Chapter One of this project explores the significance of silence in his *Yokohama, California* (1949) and *The Chauvinist and Other Stories* (1979), which were the first books of short stories published by a Japanese American in the United States. Mori’s work is barely written about and often discredited; it has been seen as overly sentimental and only “culturally” significant, and I attempt to assess his work from a cultural and political point of view as well as attending to the finer points of his language. I was struck by the beautiful simplicity of his sentences, the new intricacies of form and repetition that I noticed on each re-

reading. In analyzing his work, I examine how negative conceptions of “silent” and apolitical Asian Americans came into being and have changed over time, using material by literary critic Youngsuk Chae and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to provide framing and anchor the chapter. The proliferation of silence in Mori’s work might seem to support the stereotype of the acquiescent Asian. However, I find ultimately that Mori’s work resists the notion of silence as indicative of “model minority” assimilation.

Chapter Two uses Fredric Jameson's problematic theory of Third World “national allegory” as a compelling framework through which to criticize ongoing concerns about the authenticity and literary merit of Asian American literature. Many of these concerns dovetailed with my own perceptions (self-conscious exotification in an attempt towards cultural authenticity, emphasis on content rather than form, pandering to white audiences, preoccupation with identity that in the end upholds American-ness as whiteness, and so forth). Jameson may not be all wrong—but his theory of Third World Literature (within which I include Asian American literature) as “necessarily” allegorical of nation and collective only perpetuates the idea that such literatures “are” a certain way and no other. With Jameson as a jumping-off point, I consider issues of collective, representation, and canon, as well as the relationship between silence, speech, and writing in Akhil Sharma’s *Family Life* and Chang-Rae Lee’s “Faintest Echo of Our Language.” Lee’s essay powerfully overturns essentializing conceptions of racial and ethnic collectivity, as well as monolithic ideas of what constitutes the Third World. Both Lee and Sharma recount their early experiences writing about white people, feeling as though Americans like themselves had no place in the national literature. In the end, both focus on community without sacrificing the humanity of the Asian American individual, challenging our ideas of what Asian American literature is—and what it can do.

Finally, Chapter Three addresses relations between Asian Americans and African Americans, which have been central to both Asian American identity formation and to the roots of Asian American literature. *Aiiieeeee!*, considered the seminal anthology of Asian American literature, was published in 1974 through the Howard University Press. Support from the black literary community bolstered the new success of Asian American writers; the Civil Rights Movement served as a template for the resulting Asian American Movement (and contributed to legal strides benefiting not only black Americans but other minorities). Nonetheless, the work of *Aiiieeeee!* editor Frank Chin is extremely reliant on racist stereotypes of black hypermasculinity and presents black culture as a means through which to make the male Asian American subject “whole.” Idealized and inadequate visions of a “post-racial” future in Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* are also discussed, problematizing recent appeals to “go beyond black and white.” In popular discourse, relations between Asian and African Americans are often simplified, presented either as straightforward antagonism or alliance. In this chapter, I wanted to acknowledge the oft-forgotten history of solidarity between these two communities. I felt it just as important, however, to attend to ongoing conceptions of Asian “silence” and “invisibility” versus black “loudness” and “hypervisibility,” as well as failures of Asian American literature to consider the specificity of black experience.

I am no way an equal to Arundhati Roy. Still, I did my best to “go where the silence was,” to “understand why the silence was there.” Each of my chapters, I feel, grapples with an omission of sorts. To whoever may read this: I hope my project can in some small way inspire new thoughts on Asian American literature, what it is, what it means, what it can achieve. Writing it certainly did for me.

1

“The Most Beautiful Symphony”:
Silence in the Stories of Toshio Mori

Introduction

As I set out to consider the significance of silence in the works of Toshio Mori, I cannot fail to acknowledge how conceptions of silence have played out in the reality of Asian American experience. Silence, pause, and the unspeakable are fascinating and fraught concepts in literature generally. I have always been interested in how writers use language to grapple with what is beyond it. Even so, I find myself struck by how the Asian American community in particular is consistently, and negatively, designated as “silent.”

Such designations date back to the mid-to-late 1800s, during which Chinese immigrants were effectively recruited as cheap labor in the aftermath of the Civil War and abolition of slavery. In addition, as Youngsuk Chae explains in her *Politicizing Asian American Literature*, Chinese workers were harnessed as a strike-breaking and “union-disintegrating force” (21). They served as substitutes for the “domestic white workers” and “European immigrant workers” fighting for better wages and conditions (21). As a result, “Chinese workers were depicted by employers as ‘docile’ employees” in comparison—and as “subservient and compliant” by European immigrant workers, who “did not think that the Chinese workers could have a working-class consciousness and establish solidarity” with either domestic or immigrant white labor forces (21).

Eventually, anti-Chinese sentiment led to Chinese exclusion, coinciding with the beginnings of Japanese immigration to the U.S. Similarly, Japanese workers were well-received by American employers, but were met with resentment by other laborers. Ultimately, Japanese immigration was likewise restricted (23). Chae argues that such policies, in conjunction with racist slurs and stereotypes “such as ‘servile coolie’ or ‘unassimilable inferior race’ have reinforced the maintenance of the status of minority immigrants as the ‘forever alien’ in the

United States” (23).

A reserved, emotionless, and deferent stereotype persists today. In recent years, Asian Americans have often been portrayed as a “model,” “successful minority.” Such portrayals originated in the 1960s with press coverage on Japanese Americans who had endured internment “through their hard work” and Chinese Americans who had found economic success “without relying on government welfare” (25). These depictions not only ignore the substantial number of Asian Americans living in impoverished conditions, but also are often predicated on unfavorable comparisons with other nonwhite Americans, particularly black Americans. According to stories in this vein, social and political change is unnecessary and systems like welfare are wasteful concessions made to the lazy. Accordingly, all that is truly required in order to secure a comfortable life is patience and hard work; structural inequality does not exist, and the American Dream prevails. At its core, the “model minority” myth continues to “Otherize” Asian Americans, building off of older conceptualizations of Chinese and Japanese immigrants as compliant and submissive—and, perhaps most importantly, silently acquiescent, unthreatening to the status quo.

Supposedly uniquely “Asian” diffidence is seen as a result of sociocultural differences, as well as recognized as a by-product of oppression. Nonetheless, I am troubled too by the impulse among circles of social action to place silence and speech on mutually exclusive and opposing sides. According to the popular language of activism, silence is bad: it represents acquiescence, assimilation, and subordination. Less privileged Americans are urged to “speak out,” to “break” the silence and thus become liberated. Chae, as well, refers to “the assimilation, acculturation, or *silence* of Asian Americans,” as if these are equivalent terms (16).

However, I believe that the notion that whoever does not “speak out” is complicit in their

own continued subjugation is a flawed one, for multiple reasons. Oppressed peoples are often described as “silenced,” denoting that such a state is one forced upon them by those with power, rather than one of choice. Chae points out that “many Asian Americans who have settled down as middle-class have shown a tendency to be politically silent or even disengaging about unequal power relations along race/ethnicity lines,” and notes that “in some ways, their silence or ‘subservience,’ [...] could be their ‘price’ for having escaped their politically and economically unstable countries of origin, [...] and for having ‘successfully’ resettled in the United States” (30).

Toshio Mori (1910-1980)—whose *Yokohama, California* (1949) was the first collection of short stories published by a Japanese-American author, and *The Chauvinist*, published thirty years later, the second—endured his own share of “silencing.” His first collection was “shelved indefinitely” upon the beginning of World War II, during which he was confined in Utah’s Topaz Relocation Camp, where he was named “camp historian” (Barnhart 195). Upon its publication, his work was largely ignored even among the Japanese-American community, but found new regard in the 1960s and 70s with the advent of the Asian American movement (*Encyclopedia of Asian-American Literature*, 200).

“Can the Subaltern Speak?” asks Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and her answer is a resounding “no.” The subaltern are, in fact, those who cannot speak. Once an oppressed group is able to “speak,” they are granted the potential to revise history—no longer remaining the *subaltern* “*subject*” of hegemonic power but becoming instead merely “altern.” Works like Mori’s were suppressed and relegated to “subalternity” in the 1940s as they “threatened the seamless version of national identity and history embodied by official narratives of U.S. participation in World War II, narratives that posited specific conceptualizations not only of

American identity but also of war and wartime experience” (Duncan 93). Asian Americans are typically viewed as submissive and non-threatening by virtue of their “silence,” but the censorship of texts like Mori’s evidence their forced silencing.

At the same time, though, I resist the idea that silence, when it *is* chosen, has only assimilatory aims. Not only is silence racialized and perceived as a passive response to suffering, it is seen as having little value, being equivalent to submission, offering no potential for change or expression. Is the absence of language always emblematic of an inability—or an unwillingness—to communicate or protest? For what other reasons might one need—and choose—silence? There is a proliferation of silence in Mori’s work, sometimes as a manifestation of alienation and hopelessness, which is potentially indicative of an inability to reconcile Japanese and American identity. On the other hand, his characters also harness silence as a way to find strength, pursue meaning, and foster a sense of connection and community with one another.

Chae’s book sets itself up to “draw a contrast between politically acquiescent multiculturalism and politically conscious multiculturalism” within Asian American literature (6). She defines acquiescent works as those that “celebrate cultural diversity while masking unequal power structures and exploitation of labor”—works that do not address the realities of racism, that corroborate the model minority myth, and that Otherize their own characters (7). Politically conscious works, rather, do not remain “silent” on these issues but “situate their stories [...] in specific contexts” (7). Overall, she designates “popular,” “acquiescent” works as “silent,” and, citing Spivak, attempts to “measure” these silences (31). Where does Toshio Mori’s work fall? Is his work acquiescent, or is it conscious? How can we measure his silences?

Spivak and Chae alike critique “the problem of ‘the permission to narrate,’” or

“multicultural” narratives that only reinforce white and Western dominance (Spivak 79). Spivak takes issue with post-colonial theorists who fail to conceptualize subaltern, disenfranchised peoples outside of a model that presents them as “other” to a white, Eurocentric “default.” According to her article, attempts within this model to give silenced people a voice only perpetuate the hegemonic structure of power. Similarly, Chae problematizes the popular language of “multiculturalism,” which on the surface appears to value “difference,” but in the end only serves to mask the reality of racism and inequality (2).

Yokohama, California, from its very title, could be read as such an example of glib “multiculturalism.” The work’s indebtedness to Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* might also be taken as a sort of “permission to narrate” granted within the confines of white and Western storytelling. Mori himself claimed that he was “really trying [his] best to reach the white American readers in general,” but this was in a concerted effort to introduce them to writings that did something other than just take on “Japanese subjects through humor” (*Unfinished Message* 228). Though reaching a wider audience was certainly on his mind, his intent was to break stereotypes, rather than reiterate them to curry favor with white readers.

Spivak’s definition of speech is contingent on the possibility of response (de Kock 46). In my view, silence in Mori’s work proves to be a form of speech in its own right. It is not merely emblematic of acquiescence, nor is it solely the manifestation of an inability to communicate or the absence of real communication. For *Yokohama, California*’s “Woman Who Makes Swell Doughnuts”’s titular woman and her visitor, silence is a connective force and a respite from the “dissonance” and “hugeness” of the outside world, rather than being purely indicative of acceptance or ignorance of suffering (24). “Hawaiian Note” and “He Who Has the Laughing Face,” as well, feature silences that are far from assimilatory. Instead, the fact that these Japanese

Americans can share in meaningful silence not only enables them to retain a sense of identity, but affirms the depth of their connection. For Takanoshin Sakoda of “The Chauvinist,” silence is a conscious choice, and a form of resistance through which to transcend the banality of everyday life. Far from being empty, avoidant, or submissive, in Mori’s body of work silence is an alternative means of expression, communication, and storytelling, and its own way of survival and liberation in an oppressive world.

**“Many Minutes in Silence”:
The Woman Who Makes Swell Doughnuts**

“The Woman Who Makes Swell Doughnuts,” a brief vignette describing a most ordinary event—the narrator goes over to old woman Mama’s and enjoys a few homemade doughnuts—is nonetheless imbued with a spiritual significance. At its core, “Swell Doughnuts” is a story about the transformative power of silence. For these two characters, silence is not defensive or willfully ignorant, it is “alive” and suffused with openness of spirit. “I do not need to be on guard [here],” the narrator states, depicting Mama’s house as a site of refuge: “But I am on guard and foot-loose because the room is alive” (24). “On guard and foot-loose” are interestingly paired, with the typical meaning of “on guard” suggesting defensiveness in contrast to “foot-loose” as free and unencumbered. However, in its second occurrence, “on guard” seems to connote instead alertness and awareness. The “experience” of entering her home and sitting together quietly is one of both “necessity and growth,” and a sanctuary from the outside world where he must be “on guard” in a more negative sense (22, 23). In contrast to more limited conceptions of silence as maintaining stagnancy, here the narrator sees it as something he not only needs, but something essential to his change and maturation as a human being.

Moreover, silence not only has the power to change the individual, but also to effect

change on a greater level. “When I sit with her [...] I do not need to know Plato or The Sacred Books of the East or dancing,” the narrator says (24), recalling an earlier passage which describes their time together as “the dancing of emotions before our eyes and inside of us, the dance that is still but is the roar and the force capable of stirring the earth and the people” (22). Mori juxtaposes physical and metaphysical “dancing,” highlighting and prioritizing the spiritual energy and activity that silence allows. Sitting alongside Mama, he can feel his mind’s “stillness” and its simultaneous “roar” with an incredible sensitivity. Silence enables him to access “the dance” within himself—but this is a force not merely responsible for his own “growth,” but one that is capable of “stirring the earth and the people” (22). This suggests that for these characters, silence truly has the capacity to “change the world”—just as much as, and perhaps yet more than, impassioned speech.

Mama and her visitor do not need to use language in order to foster a sense of community with one another, and the absence of language serves for them a means through which to experience great beauty (22):

Sometimes we sit many minutes in silence. Silence does not bother her. She says silence is the most beautiful symphony, she says the air breathed in silence is sweeter and sadder. That is about all we talk of. Sometimes I sit and gaze out the window and watch the Southern Pacific trains rumble by and the vehicles whizz with speed. And sometimes she catches me doing this and she nods her head and I know she understands that I think the silence in the room is great, and also the roar and the dust of the outside is great, and when she is nodding I understand that she is saying that this, her little room, her little circle, is a depot, a pause, for the weary traveler, but outside, outside of her little world there is dissonance, hugeness of another kind, and the travel to do. (22)

To Mama, silence is “the most beautiful symphony,” carrying beauty and meaning in its own right, as well as a way—a sort of lens—through which to find beauty and meaning in the external. Silence makes the very atmosphere “sweeter and sadder,” and affords the smallest gestures

significance and grace. Without exchanging a word, the narrator “know[s],” definitively, that “she understands” his thoughts as he gazes out the window; and he too “understands” what “she is saying” in the nodding of her head. “The silence in the room is great, and also the roar and the dust of the outside is great,” he thinks, the “roar” of the outside calling to mind the “roar” inside of him, and inside of her, and inside of every person.

Though one is loud and the other an absence of sound, both the silence and the roar are “great”—vast and awe-inspiring—in their lack of reliance on language. Nonetheless, the “hugeness” inside her “little” room and the “hugeness” outside it are of different “kinds.” Paradoxically, the enormity of the silence within her “little circle”—and potentially, within the self—is expansive and untethered, leaving the narrator “foot-loose”; the hugeness of the world without is “dissonant” and characterized by constant motion and duty (the travel that is “to be done”). Both are “great” in their own way, yet silence and “pause” are what allow for growth, as well as provide a reprieve from pain and confusion, and a way of giving the world a sense of beauty and meaning.

“The Woman Who Makes Swell Doughnuts” ends on the note of a feeling of community—a shared humanity—in silence. “People from all parts of the earth may drop in and taste the flavor, her flavor, which is everyone’s and all flavor,” the narrator muses, “[may] sit with her, and also taste the silence of her room and the silence that is herself” (24-25). Silence does not have to strip a people of their identity; here, it can create identity and create community. Though silence may be connected with “sweetness” as well as “sadness,” this does not have to mean that in silence one remains rooted in suffering. Instead, “sitting” and “tasting the silence” together may be a way of connecting across suffering, of finding beauty and hope: it is “everyone’s and all flavor.”

However, where “Swell Doughnuts” invites “people from all parts of the earth” to sit and taste Mama’s silence, in a later piece, the personal essay “Hawaiian Note,” Mori gestures towards a more specifically Japanese-American sense of solidarity (24). He puts forth similar, but more explicitly culturally charged sentiments when recounting his own friendship with “A.M., Hawaiian Nisei”: “[She is] limited of schooling but learned from much suffering. Her steady, piercing eyes tell me much, and I need very little conversation from her to understand and communicate. We are conscious that we are members of a group who translate with a wordless language” (*The Chauvinist* 142). As “members of a group” with a communal and fraught history, together they share in a language that is beyond that of “conversation.” They are silently “conscious” of their bond, sharing too in an unspoken but deeply felt recognition of their connection to one another. “Hawaiian Note” indicates a possible shift in Mori’s philosophy later in life, but this emphasis on Japanese American community is evident in the earlier stories of *Yokohama, California* as well.

**“A Phenomenon of Life”:
He Who Has the Laughing Face**

Reminiscent of A.M. and Mori’s nonverbal “consciousness” of their shared strength, suffering and heritage, another *Yokohama, California* piece, “He Who Has the Laughing Face,” features an unnamed narrator (perhaps in fact the same one as in “Swell Doughnuts”) who finds him or herself drawn to a fellow Japanese man he or she often sees sitting alone in the park. Though the narrator states that this man is “like all or any of the park bench sitters on Sundays,” what seems to set him apart is that he is “*the Japanese*” (122, 121). Just as we are told in “Swell Doughnuts” that “there is in every block of every city in America a woman who can be called Mama by her friends and the strangers meeting her,” and yet, there is something special,

something brave and even precious about this particular woman, the same applies to this man, Tsumura (23). Despite Mori's universalizing impulse, he simultaneously takes care to pull back and assert the importance of a specifically Japanese-American identity and experience.

Of course, such insistence on shared experience and shared identity can pose its own problems. I am driven to read Mori's emphasis on Japanese American connection as a key feature of his work that distances it from "politically acquiescent" writings. However, it is also possible to see this as an essentializing and oppressive impulse—one that serves to "reduce immigrants to essentially different ethnic groups and implicitly foster 'cultural separatism' in the name of difference and cultural pluralism" (Chae 2). Assimilation implies that one has blended into the dominant culture, relinquishing all markers of "difference." Nonetheless, the concept of "difference" itself works to normalize the dominant culture, and to categorize people into neatly defined ethnicities or subcultures. In her "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak cautions that we must "insist that the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous" (79). She highlights the crisis inherent in studying or writing about any marginalized "group" of people: the fact that generalization, however well-meaning, maintains their dehumanization as "Other." Meanwhile, "the color of white ethnic culture" is for all intents and purposes "invisible in the background" (Chae 2).

"This is *Yokohama, California*," declares Lawson Fusao Inada on the first page of his introduction to the text: "This *is* Japanese America" (Inada, v). Definitive statements like these are unsettling, as is his assertion that this is "the book which simply reflects the *actual* atmosphere of the time, the way the people felt, saw, and lived" (ix). Chae counts Inada among a camp of writers and scholars who have promoted an essentializing dialogue around Asian American literature (15). Their demand for authenticity hinges on restrictive identity politics that

perhaps serve only to fit Asian Americans into yet another box. “If Asian American writers participate in essentializing ethnic differences as ‘exotic,’ then a question arises: For whose sake is multiculturalism promoted and celebrated?” asks Chae, implying that such self-exotification upholds white dominance (17). At the same time, arguing that people living under oppression are no different than their oppressors—that “we all bleed red,” that we “are all part of the *human* race”—obviously misses the mark as well, completely brushing aside history and institutionalized racism.

For the most part, I do not believe that Mori engages in such self-exotification and essentialization. Stories like “Swell Doughnuts” and “Laughing Face,” as well as his relationship with A.M. in “Hawaiian Note,” do affirm perhaps problematically that there is some “homogeneity” across the Japanese American experience. However, this “homogeneity” is not one that enables the unquestioned dominance of white America. Instead, the connections they share as Japanese Americans allow them to resist assimilation and to retain a sense of identity. Furthermore, in leaving things unsaid, Mori effectively normalizes his characters and their community, rather than “Otherizing” them. He does not take pains to explain Japanese American “difference” to the white reader—and, as Inada points out, “there are no white people in all of *Yokohama, California*” (*Yokohama*, xvii). Accordingly, “the people do not define themselves as nonwhite,” and have no need to define themselves in opposition to whiteness while maintaining the binary of object and subject (xvii). By leaving much unspoken and unexplained, Mori refuses to center the white gaze.

A.M.’s “piercing eyes tell [Mori] much,” and Tsumura’s “laughing face,” his smile “not from happiness [and] not from sadness” tells “Laughing Face”’s narrator something about him and about the connection they share as Japanese-Americans (*Chauvinist* 142, *Yokohama* 121).

Laughter, like silence, distances the outside viewer, but the narrator somehow understands the emotions behind Tsumura's strange "smile." "By the time I began to guess who he was and what he did," the narrator says, after watching the stranger for a while, "he was someone of immense proportions, someone living close to me or someone I know and talk to" (122). Before he even starts to "guess" at Tsumura's identity, he is already struck by a sense of both this man's great significance and his "closeness" to his own life. Although at this point Tsumura is a complete mystery to the narrator, he recognizes some intimate bond between them: he is "someone living close to me or someone I know and talk to." This recognition potentially reflects again the "consciousness" of "members of a group" (*Chauvinist* 142).

When the narrator finally speaks to Tsumura upon his return to the park, their shared ancestry is again highlighted:

He made room for me. We sat and talked a good hour or more. He said his name was Tsumura, and he was from Shinano prefecture in Japan. I said my parents were from Hiroshima prefecture and he said he knew a number of people from Hiroshima.
 "I was afraid I had lost you, that I would not see you again," I said.
 The man laughed. "You need not be afraid," he said. "I am always here." (124-125)

Despite the fact that they talk "a good hour or more," all that is initially revealed about their conversation is the exchanging of their places of origin in Japan, as if the rest is of little importance. The two are from different prefectures, with Tsumura himself from Shinano but the narrator's parents from Hiroshima. Nevertheless, particularly in light of the difference in generation between the two characters, the juxtaposition of their discussion of Japanese ancestry and the narrator's fear of "losing" Tsumura suggests that Tsumura could represent ties to the narrator's own heritage—and his assuaging comment imply that the ties are always there, never lost.

Interestingly, Tsumura's "immense proportions" and his familiarity are conflated; typically, we do not think of people we "know and talk to," or our neighbors, as being of such magnitude (122). Mori and his narrator paradoxically treasure Tsumura, like Mama, simply because he is "unhurried and unflustered and still living" (123). Tsumura and Mama both seem to be individuals who represent a larger whole; individuals who are simple, everyday people but carry immense meaning. Furthermore, they are people who enable such "pause"—this reconnection with self, as well as identity and culture, in simply sitting together in silence. Silence in these stories is in fact opposite to assimilation, acquiescence, or avoidance. Instead, it serves as a stay against such losses of identity and connection. Tsumura's "immensity" stems from his silence, in that he sits "without words,"

not singing dramatically in the opera or the arena, not writing to bring tears or happiness, not using, not playing, not living heroically in one word perhaps, but alive, basking today, a living presence, a phenomenon of life that is here awhile and gone without an answer. (123)

Here Mori uses the phrase "one word" in a double meaning, both idiomatically and to simultaneously emphasize Tsumura's lack of reliance on language. Tsumura is "not using, not playing, not living heroically in one word perhaps"—he is not "writing," not "singing," not "using," "playing," or "living in" a single word; indeed, he is not engaging with words whatsoever. At the same time, however, the passage carries another meaning: he is "not living heroically in one word perhaps," i.e., in "a word," in sum, his life is not a "heroic" one. What does this mean, then, in terms of the implications of silence? Tsumura may not be heroic in conventional terms, which to Mori seems to be contingent on broadcasting oneself: he does not speak out, nor does he put himself on display. He seeks no audience and has no intent to excite reaction ("tears or happiness") in anyone.

What about Tsumura's silence, then, makes him a "phenomenon of life?" In David R. Mayer's "Toshio Mori and Loneliness," he questions whether the "silence in the face of tribulation" as demonstrated by Mori and his characters is merely "a straight face in front of others" or "an Oriental reticence about expressing personal feelings to strangers, a kind of politeness" (21). "Laughing Face" tells us from its very first sentence that "the simplest thing to say of [Tsumura] is that he is sad and alone but is laughing all the time" (121). Even so, to our narrator, the "simplest" explanation is not the ideal one: describing him as such "would definitely put him in a hole and everybody would understand and say what a sad story, what an unhappy man he is, what bravery there is in the world" (121). "But," we are cautioned, "that is not the story" (121). Tsumura is not an outspoken "hero," and neither is he a sad clown bravely keeping quiet about his pain and laughing outwardly in order to hide it for the benefit of those around him. Thus, Mayer's prospective explanations are easily set aside. Mori does not sentimentalize Tsumura as someone who smiles wordlessly in the face of struggle so as not to burden others. Accordingly, silence here is far from a matter of politeness, a way of shielding one's true feelings of suffering, or a barrier one places between oneself and one's surroundings. Instead, it is a way of being truly "alive," of "basking" in life—of experiencing things as they are, rather than hiding from them (123).

Over the course of their conversation, Tsumura says "not a word [...] about the sadness of his face and his life," and the narrator "d[oes] not ask why he is sad and why he is laughing all the time," but this is not in an effort to avoid or ignore sadness (125). "We did not speak a word of it," he continues, "we did not like to be foolish and ask and answer the problem of the earth, and we did not have to" (125). Such sorrow is unnecessary to discuss as the two of them share a

wordless understanding, but also, the narrator suggests, because sadness is at the core of everything in life:

Every little observation, every little banal talk or laughing matter springs from the sadness of the earth that is reality; every meeting between individuals, every meeting of society, every meeting of a gathering, of gaiety and sorrow, springs from sadness that is the bed of earth and truth. (125)

Considered alongside the peaceful companionship of “Swell Doughnuts,” this view of the world may seem irreconcilably bleak. If all human interactions—whether of “gaiety,” “sorrow,” or both—“spring” from some core, universal sadness, all “meetings” are in effect merely one loneliness encountering another, possibly without hope of connection. However, it could then follow that silence is in some paradoxical way a respite from constant loneliness and desperation to escape “the sadness of the earth that is reality.” Whereas “meetings” spring out of an attempt against sadness—and may only reinforce misery and alienation—Tsumura, the laundry truck driver, chooses to sit in the silence, to “pause, not for great thoughts or to escape the living of life,” but simply to allow in reality, joy and sadness, and to laugh (125). According to the narrator, “this is the greatest thing happening today” (126):

A laundry truck driver or an equivalent to such who is living and coming in and out of parks [...] seeking unconsciously, unawaredly, the hold of this sadness, the loneliness, the barrenness, which is not elusive but hovering and pervading and seeping into the flesh and vegetation alike, churning out potentially the greatness, the weakness, and the heroism, the cowardice; and therefore, leaving unfinished all the causes of sadness, unhappiness, and sorrows of the earth behind in the laughter and the mute silence of time. (126)

This is a puzzling passage; it is not entirely clear here who or what is “churning out potentially the greatness, the weakness, and the heroism, the cowardice”—whether it is “this sadness” or the “laundry truck driver or an equivalent to such.” However, considering that Tsumura has

previously been described as counter to constructions of “heroism,” it seems likely that sadness is the culprit. To “churn out” implies that something is produced automatically and mechanically. “Potentially,” conversely, implies a decidedly un-robotic doubt; the end result of this churning may be “greatness, weakness, heroism, and cowardice,” or may not be. Ultimately, the concepts of greatness and weakness, heroism and cowardice, are undercut here—simultaneously characterized not only as mechanical outputs of sadness but as ones that are only “potentially” what they claim to be. Sadness, loneliness, and barrenness are not “elusive”; as has already been stated, sadness is everywhere, permeating everything. Yet Tsumura and those like him are the ones who “seek hold” of it in silence, rather than accept the flawed binary of cowardice and heroism that is the end-product of sadness. In leaving such concepts behind, they too “leave unfinished all the causes of sadness, unhappiness, and sorrows of the earth behind,” indicating that constructions of greatness and weakness—which pit speech as “heroic” and silence as “weak”—may in fact be not only end products but the “causes of sadness” themselves.

**“No Matter What His Words Might Have Meant”:
The Seventh Street Philosopher**

Where other Mori characters find meaning, and stave off unhappiness, in the absence of talk, Tsunoda, “The Seventh Street Philosopher,” is seized uncontrollably by words, unable to stop their “flow” once he begins (26). On first glance, this story might appear to have little to do with silence, and the character of Motoji Tsunoda himself to be the antithesis of what Toshio Mori typically supports in his work. Many of his other stories feature characters who seem to feel no need to state their feelings or ideas explicitly, their inner workings evident instead by way of their “piercing eyes,” their “gazing,” “nodding,” or “laughing.” Tsunoda, rather, is derided by those around him on account of his incessant talking, particularly on glibly “deep” topics of

ethics and morality. “What can you do but talk?” he is asked, taunted for his “fruitless” philosophizing, “which lasts so long and persists in making a show” (26). Lacking Tsumura or Mama’s poignant humility, he not only craves an audience for his thoughts but has a laughably high opinion of them, grouping himself with the “tradition and blood flow of Shakyamuni, St. Shinran, [and] Akegarasu” (28). Nonetheless, Tsunoda is respected and even venerated by the narrator.

Tsunoda is in fact a “meek man,” “a very quiet man, sitting quietly in the corner, listening to other talk until the opportunity comes” (26, 27). But where in “Swell Doughnuts” Mama’s living room is “alive” and her visitor “footloose” in silence, it is in speech that Tsunoda comes to life:

He will suddenly become alive and the subject and all the subjects in the world become his and the company of the evening his audience [...] With the beginning of words there is no stopping of Motoji Tsunoda, there is no misery in his voice nor in his stance at the time as he would certainly possess in the old washroom. His tone perks up, his body becomes straight, and in a way this slight meek man becomes magnificent, powerful, and even inspired. (26-28)

It seems significant to me that these two seemingly very different stories are juxtaposed in the text of *Yokohama, California*; “Seventh Street Philosopher” directly follows “Swell Doughnuts” and its vision of a tender, regenerative sort of silence. Tsunoda, rather, is an outwardly “quiet man” who explodes into talk, and when he speaks, “all his silent hours and silent vigils with deep thoughts and books come to the fore and there is no stopping of his flow of words and thoughts” (26). For Tsunoda, it is not enough to let his musings go unspoken; his “silent hours and silent vigils” seem to burst forth uncontrollably, unwilling and unintended to remain “silent.” Furthermore, his identity is entwined completely with the words he speaks. There is “no stopping of his flow of words” and, in the passage above, “no stopping of Motoji Tsunoda,” as if this flow

and Tsunoda himself are one and the same, or as if the true essence of himself is seamlessly, perfectly transmitted in speech (26, 28).

In “Swell Doughnuts,” silence serves as a “pause” from the “dissonance” and “hugeness” of the responsibilities of life and of the environment (24). However, it seems apparent here that Mori does not only advocate and idealize silence as a way of surviving, of connecting, and of perceiving the world. Silence in this story is equivalent to despair, with Tsunoda’s “silent hours and silent vigils” working alone in “the sad washroom” amounting to nothing and bringing him no joy until they are voiced (28). But “with the beginning of words,” Mori writes, “there is no misery in his voice nor in his stance at the time as he would certainly possess in the old washroom” (28). For Tsunoda, speech is a form of survival, a respite from the pain of his widower’s life of “obscurity,” from the “misery” of his lonely labor (26, 28).

Just as silence is transformative for Mama and her visitor, here speech is profoundly transformative, even to the point of the physical: not only Tsunoda’s “tone,” but his “body” as well changes in the process. As the words leave him, as they become externalized and are met with an “audience,” Tsunoda’s character and confidence are radically changed; he is “magnificent, powerful, inspired” where once he was “meek” and “desperate” (28, 27). Moreover, the narrator describes the speech he gives at the local auditorium in terms of literally sustaining his life force: “it was an event which has prolonged the life of Motoji Tsunoda, acting as a stimulant” (28). He is invigorated by this serendipitous opportunity, infused with mysterious power and vitality, ultimately seeming to have “outgrown the life of a launderer, outgrown the meekness and derision, outgrown the patheticness of it and the loneliness” (30). Through speaking and sharing his ideas with others, his entire person and identity is effectively remade.

How are these two stories related, and how can we reconcile these two modes of being

(speech and silence), these two different means through which the self can be transformed and sustained, as well as experience a connection with others? Despite the fact that the act of speaking is a transcendent one for Tsunoda, it is not his words nor their subject matter that ennoble him to the narrator. His intellectual ramblings are ignored by others in favor of “conversations on business or weather or how the friends are getting along these days,” and the narrator is likewise uninterested in his “deep” and “crazy thoughts” (27, 26). Instead, the narrator is captivated by “what [Tsunoda] is,” “and what he is actually and desperately trying to put across to the people and the world” (27).

What is beautiful about Tsunoda’s speech is ultimately not his words nor their meaning. For a story that has so much to do with speaking and voicing, we hardly hear Tsunoda’s voice, or anyone else’s, in dialogue. Of the few pieces of dialogue we do have, none are from his speech or from his philosophical ramblings in company at the narrator’s home. The narrator values instead his “beautiful gestures and miserable gestures coming and going; and the thoughts unexpressed and the dreams pursued to be expressed” (30-31). Even when describing Tsunoda’s speech, the narrator prioritizes what is unvoiced: “gestures” without language, the thoughts and dreams as of yet “unexpressed,” and the sound of his impressively steady “voice” as opposed to the words themselves (31):

As for Tsunoda’s speech that is another matter. In a way, however, I thought he did some beautiful philosophizing that night. No matter what his words might have meant, no matter what gestures and what provoking issues he might have spoken in the past, there was this man, standing up and talking to the world, and also talking to vindicate himself to the people, trying as hard as he could so he would not be misunderstood. (32)

Mori’s use of phrases like “that is another matter” and “in a way” make it clear that there was nothing particularly special about Tsunoda’s words or his content. As we are told here, it

does not matter “what the words meant” or even what issues he spoke of. His passion, his yearning to connect, and his attempt to be understood are what truly make him admirable. In a certain light, Tsunoda’s words are similar to silence in how they are perceived by others. Just as silence is often undervalued and attributed no meaning, Tsunoda’s philosophizing, too, is called “fruitless” (26). Almost no one attends his lecture, and the majority of those that do fall asleep as he drones on. Nevertheless, there is beauty in this as well—in “the audience listening and snoring, and the beautiful auditorium standing ready to accommodate more people” (32). To Mori, the significance of Tsunoda’s words and the amount of people he actually reaches are not the measure of his “wonderfulness.” The wonder lies not in what he expresses, but in the attempt of “the individual standing up and expressing himself,” and in the possibility of connection (32). Though he may not be understood, Tsunoda continues; though the auditorium may remain empty, its seats are “ready” nonetheless to be filled. In the end, Tsunoda’s “voice, his gestures, his sadness, his patheticness, his bravery,” rather than his words, are what the audience will “understand, sympathize and remember for awhile” (32).

Complicating Silence: “Toshio Mori” and “The Chauvinist”

The stories “Toshio Mori” and “The Chauvinist” further complicate a reading of Mori’s work in which silence is wholly positive and useful. These two pieces feature silence both as an extension of alienation and as a means through which to find connection, catharsis, and transcendence. Teruo, the main character of “Toshio Mori,” has been taken as a representation of the author himself under the rationale that the title signifies the story’s autobiographical nature. If we believe this, Teruo is then the closest character to Mori, and thus his story perhaps most accurately depicts Mori’s own beliefs and experiences. In this light, the fact that the story is

perhaps *Yokohama, California*'s bleakest piece is somewhat surprising. Unlike "Swell Doughnuts," "Seventh Street Philosopher," and "He Who Has the Laughing Face," "Toshio Mori" is devoid of any moments of poignant connection. Instead, it details Teruo's desperate and unfulfilled desire to be understood, and within the story, neither silence nor talk affords him any consolation.

"Toshio Mori" finds Teruo on a particularly dismal afternoon; he is "disturbed," caught in an "ominous feeling of standing alone" (37). He is taken by an unquenchable impulse to go to the city, where he might forget the sensation of being somehow unhinged from life. "Tonight he could not sit with the family and talk," he thinks: "he could not listen to the radio; he could not read. He could not, moreover, sit in silence like other nights; in constant wake of himself and the field he worked in the daytime" (40). His emotions first seem to follow a familiar trajectory for a Mori protagonist—he pulls back from talking or from finding solace in listening to or reading words. However, even more strongly felt here is an impulse *against* the lack of sound or voice. He cannot talk; "*moreover*," he cannot sit in his usual silence, as it only traps him in himself.

Much like Tsunoda, Teruo feels a pressing need to express himself verbally and to be acknowledged. However, where Tsunoda always eventually finds a way to insert himself into a conversation, Teruo is unable to speak once given the opportunity. He visits his friend, Tsuyuko, but is dismayed to discover that she is already entertaining two other acquaintances. "As he [sits] in the midst of laughter and lively chatter," Teruo feels that "he [is] out of it all, alone, alien, orphaned" (41). Surrounded by the talk of others, he only feels more aware of his isolation. The contrast between his silence and the boisterous chatting of Tsuyuko and her friends "shakes him" and leaves him "helpless" (41). Tsunoda, seemingly blissfully unaware of the disinterest of his audience, can go on speaking eternally; Teruo, intimidated by strangers and painfully conscious

of his difference, cannot even begin.

Ultimately, Teruo does not find what he is looking for—all he is left with is “aloneness and sadness” (43). After seeking connection and compassion he only feels the lack of it more intensely, more “miserable” with each failed effort. He returns home to the silence of the night, listening to the sounds of his mother and brother breathing and snoring on the other side of his wall. This relative silence is again emblematic of his alienation, with the fact that his family’s small sleeping noises are audible emphasizing their physical closeness and simultaneous emotional distance from Teruo. Lying awake, he knows “he [is] not through with the state of his feeling,” “aware that no one [knows] him as he [knows] himself” (43, 45). Silence offers Teruo no respite. On the contrary, it amplifies his loneliness, within which he also feels incapable of expressing his despair. Teruo, unable to speak and certain that he could not be heard or understood even if he tried, seems to epitomize the “subaltern subject” here. “Toshio Mori” overall complicates the notion that all Japanese Americans are bonded in some transcendent, inherently understood silence. Even Teruo’s family is alien to him, unable to understand his feelings wordlessly or otherwise.

In spite of this, the redemptive time he imagines he could have shared with Tsuyuko mirrors, for example, the peaceful moment between Mama and the narrator of “Swell Doughnuts.” “If we had been alone together,” Teruo muses, “it might have been different” (42). She might then have “understood, only have smiled and listened and said nothing and it might have done a world of good for him” (42). Teruo’s ideal interaction is one-on-one and intimate, with an emphasis on a wordless sympathy and comprehension. Though he still feels a need to speak and to be truly heard, he feels no need to be responded to: “Just to have her close to him tonight, to understand him as he understood his state of feeling, would have been sufficient” (42).

Tsuyuko's imagined "smile," too, is reminiscent of Tsumura's knowing laughter as well as Mama's "nod." Despite "Toshio Mori"'s existentially grim tone and its fraught relationship with both silence and speech, the story retains hope for connection—and values silence—under the right circumstances.

For Takanoshin Sakoda of "The Chauvinist," living in silence and isolation is a conscious choice, rather than something he is forced into by virtue of external forces or his own sadness. Though those around him believe him to be deaf—and several critics as well have described him as such—Sakoda states, "I am the man who remains silent to the little voices around me. I did not declare myself to be anything" (19). "One day I simply sat down," he explains, "and my family began to screech at me. It took them ten minutes to come to my side and look at each other's faces [...] 'He's gone deaf!' my daughter screams" (19). Though he could have corrected his family and made it evident that he was merely pulling a prank, Sakoda takes this misunderstanding as an opportunity to "become the beginning of a new refreshment of life" (20). By pretending he cannot hear, he is no longer obligated to acknowledge the "little voices"—the "screeches" and "screams"—populating his everyday life. Moreover, he defines himself not in terms of an inability to hear, but in terms of his lack of response: he "remains silent" (19).

In a sense, Sakoda's silence is a form of resistance through which to transcend the banality of everyday life, as well as to find peace with the absurdity of the world. When the members of the Community Women's Club come by, conversing with one another about how he is "lazy, weak, and boneless," with the "mind of a monkey," Sakoda "meets their glances with a smile, the way the tolerant sages of history must have done":

He is all smiles because he could not have heard the conversation. He is deaf. His ears are out of order. He looks at the ceiling and smiles. Everything is out of order. The arrangement of his life for

instance is out of order. The system of civilization is out of order.
Ditto the people and the world. (19)

His feigned deafness gives him the power to detach—to be “all smiles” when he is insulted, and to “sagely” accept not only the disorder of his own life but that of the world on a much larger scale: “civilization,” “the world.” “I am deaf,” Sakoda asserts, arguing that “this is untruth but I’m not lying. A liar is a cheat who harms others. I am like a beggar who must become blind to make a living. The only difference is that I have become deaf to survive the living” (19-20). In his own words, he maintains that he has taken to silence as a way to “survive.” Self-imposed isolation has become the only way he can bear “the living”—both existence itself and the people around him.

Sakoda disdains idle chit-chat; he lambasts the men and women visiting for their “same tone, same gestures, same subject, same duties and obligations, same destiny,” calling them “dead so soon” (21). “Why doesn’t someone talk about death (slow death) some night?” he asks:

The death in the flower arrangement. The death in the flower. The death in our life. The death of a birth. Some people wouldn’t glibly talk; it would take their minds off talk. And the silence would be refreshing and strange. Imagine the silence at the women’s club meeting. The silence in a deaf man’s house. The silence wouldn’t be eternal; make no mistake about that. It wouldn’t be what we would like to have but ah, what is eternal? (21)

He describes silence as “refreshing and strange,” highlighting how his feigned deafness has granted him access to a different mode of being. In his silence he is taken by reveries and philosophizing, and the piece itself is in an unusual style for Mori, marked by a more experimental and stream-of-consciousness flair. Nevertheless, though Sakoda’s silence may free him from discussing “weather” and “business,” his musings on the “death of life” and “death of birth” are in their own way just as “glib” as the banal talk of the women’s club meeting and the husbands coming to pick up their wives. Sakoda here recalls Tsunoda’s laughable self-

importance and the relative insignificance of his “deep and crazy” thoughts. The fact that silence here is not “eternal” and never can be suggests as well that not only is the silence of others unsustainable, but that Sakoda must one day enter back into reality—and communication with others.

In fact, Sakoda himself realizes that he still possesses a need for connection. Silence and “deafness” may free him in certain respects, but while he remains silent in isolation, he can never be truly fulfilled. “I want to talk to someone. I want to talk and listen and answer. I want to sing in a chorus in tune with the rest of the crowd,” he says, “I too want to join and laugh and joke. I want sometimes to tell all the people what I know and how little I know” (22). In the end, he accepts responsibility for his own position:

One minute you were always light-hearted and wise-cracking. You had the sense of hearing and your friends acknowledging it. You laughed your way out of difficulties, making a lark of life. You heard laughter and you laughed. [...] Words came easy. [...] You never lost your sense of hearing, but a day of a joke on your wife and family and friends turned the spring. You were you yesterday. You are you today. You sit in a hole you made yourself. (22)

Sakoda acknowledges here that he must reconcile his “words” and his “laughter” with his deafness and silence. He is no more “himself” in silence than he was before; he is “himself” both now and in the past—and at its core, “deafness” is but another “hole” inside which he has become trapped. Waking the next morning, Sakoda “nerves unflinching [...] attempts communication,” finding himself “now not only deaf but visionless, dumb, feelingless, colorless, numb,” possessing “only a sixth sense serenity” (24). His wholly silent life is ultimately unsustainable. Though it offers him a unique perspective on life, and allows him to escape certain kinds of misery, it is only in the possibility of regaining a connection to others that he can

find true solace and “serenity.”

Conclusion

Ultimately, I find that Toshio Mori’s work resists the notion that Asian American silences are indicative only of assimilation and acquiescence to the desires of white society. The stories of *Yokohama, California* in particular emphasize the value of silence and its ability to foster connection between Japanese Americans. Rather than pandering to the white reader, these silences work to distance the white reader in their refusal to explain “difference” in an easily digestible way. Mori utilizes silence as a way to underscore the shared experiences of Californian Japanese Americans, which enable them to understand one another on a unique level.

Nonetheless, both “Toshio Mori” and “The Chauvinist” complicate a simplistic, positivist reading of silence and of Japanese American community. Mori seems to believe that a sort of collective consciousness exists among Japanese Americans, yet also includes characters struggling with feelings of estrangement from their supposed “community.” Both stories prioritize human connection above all else, but unlike many of Mori’s other characters, Teruo and Takanoshin share a sense of tortured interiority that can be remedied only by a balance between silence and speech.

2

“Belonging in a Story”

Community, Representation, and Canon in Chang-Rae Lee’s “Faintest Echo of Our
Language” and Akhil Sharma’s *Family Life*

Introduction

As discussed in chapter one, I see Toshio Mori's stories as representative of Asian American silences that do more than merely promote assimilation. Even so, his work remains ambiguous on the subject of silence and its ability to foster community between Asian Americans. Despite the fact that his fiction often features instances of nonverbal communication and transcendent silence shared between "members of a group," pieces like "Toshio Mori" and "The Chauvinist" depict the experience of profound alienation even within this "group" ("Hawaiian Note" 142).

Korean American novelist Chang-Rae Lee (b. 1965) grapples, too, with questions of Asian American community. In the autobiographical "The Faintest Echo of Our Language" (1993), he recounts the death of his mother, who was a Korean immigrant to the U.S. and lived through the Japanese occupation of Korea. His essay is rife with silence in various forms and contexts: his inability to speak Korean and his mother's inability to speak English; the inability to communicate in illness and death; the banning of the Korean language under Japanese occupation; the insufficiency—or inaccessibility—of language in the face of great trauma and loss. His work is uncertain on whether "community" is truly real or possible, either in silence or in language. In this chapter, I would like to explore questions of community, representation, and the literary canon in relation to Asian American literature, specifically Lee's "Faintest Echo" and Akhil Sharma's *Family Life* (2014).

Asian American Literature as "Third World Literature": Jamesonian National Allegory in an Asian American Context

Why are these questions of collective vs. individual significant? American literary and political theorist Fredric Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational

Capitalism” (1986) put forth the argument that all “third world” literature is essentially national allegory, within which “the story of the private individual destiny is *always* an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69). At his essay’s conclusion, he takes this theory yet further, positing “the allegorical nature of all third world *culture*” in general, “where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (86). Jameson’s theory has oft been criticized, and in my opinion, rightly so. It reinforces the belief that any individual member of a marginalized group is representative of all, lumps the whole of non-Western literature into a single, unified category of “third world” (which he defines as “countries that have suffered colonialism and imperialism” in contrast to the “capitalist first world”), and labels such work “non-canonical” and “sub-genre” (67, 65).

As a result of these generalizations, Jameson fails to acknowledge the increasingly in-between status of many nations, both in the “first” and “third” worlds. Countries like India have “suffered colonialism” in the past but are now undeniably “capitalist,” replete perhaps more than ever with domestic inequality (Ahmad 7). Aijaz Ahmad states in his critique of Jameson that “there are increasingly those texts which cannot be easily placed within this or that world” (24). Jameson’s, he says, is “not a first-world text,” and his own “not a third-world text”(25). “We are not each other’s civilizational Others,” he argues, pointing out that Jameson is one of his own primary scholarly influences (25).

Jameson also leaves out texts produced by marginalized people living within capitalist societies such as the U.S, which may in fact harness national allegory more so than texts produced abroad. Citing black and feminist American texts, Ahmad asserts too that there is “within the belly of the first world’s global postmodernism, a veritable third world, perhaps two

or three of them” (24). Rather than comprising a directly oppositional binary, the first and third worlds overlap—and continue to progressively encroach upon one another. Not all Americans are equally in the position of the dominant “first world,” and not all citizens of the “third world” live under oppressed conditions (and certainly not all who do to the same extent). Asian American literature, in my view, is certainly among these texts that are between worlds—that possess supposedly “third world characteristics” even as they are produced from within the first (Ahmad 24).

Even Imre Szeman, whose “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory?” works, on the whole, to break down criticisms of Jameson, acknowledges that within his “Third World Literature,” “the nation [...] becomes a term that seems to make reference to a kind of collectivity or community that is idealized when it should be placed into question” (814). “It is not only the Asian or the African but also the American writer whose private imaginations must *necessarily* connect with experiences of the collectivity,” Ahmad similarly contends (15). All literature is arguably speaking to something greater than just the individual, seeking an audience with which to resonate. “Third world” literature may not truly be literature which allegorizes and represents the collective in some unique way. Instead, it may be merely that such allegories are only recognized when marked by some “difference” from dominant white society—or that that which is “different” is perceived as allegory.

What’s more, all texts are political, or, at least, can be read as such—no text exists in a vacuum. I find it difficult to believe that “first world” literature is wholly cut-off from the public sphere. If anything, its seeming blankness and “individuality” is allegorical, too, of Western culture’s insidious and usually unquestioned dominance. Jameson tells us that “the view from the top [...] reduces its subjects to [...] a host of fragmented subjectivities,” “to dying individual

bodies without collective pasts or futures bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality” (85). The first world, he believes, suffers a “placeless individuality” (85). On the other hand, the third world possesses a sense of “place” and sense of community, one which, as Szeman points out, Jameson idealizes. This, Jameson argues, is the reason third world literature should command the attention and respect of the West. On one level, this is a way of showing how white America’s position, “at the top” as it is, with all its power and benefits, is ultimately a dehumanized and fragmented one. Jameson attempts to pinpoint what the American elite lacks. Yet I cringe at how Jameson writes as though all other literatures exist only to remind the first world of the importance of “community”—or as though they exist only in the gaze of the first world, with the first world to complement them. Then again, his audience is clearly those first world scholars who fear or disdain such “noncanonical forms.”

Jameson’s characterization of “the canon” itself poses its own problems. Ahmad states that “instead of claiming straightforward exclusion [of “third world” literature], it is perhaps more useful to inquire as to how the principle of selective incorporation works in relation to texts produced outside the metropolitan countries” (17). What may be more precise and more telling than claiming that third world literature has been entirely shut out by the American literary establishment is to observe how certain works have made it into the canon—to focus more on what is let in and what is not; what is translated and what is not; to question why certain texts are canonized and others are ignored. Gayatri Spivak’s work proclaims that the subaltern are those that cannot speak, or, more accurately, cannot be heard. Are the works by that make it to the so-called canon then perhaps not the works that actually most need to be heard? Are these the works that most “accurately” present the situation of the “third world?” Once these texts are “heard,” not only are they no longer subaltern, but in a position between the first and third worlds upon

their recognition by the mainstream. Jameson, what with his first world positionality, obviously cannot have the greatest depth of understanding of what truly constitutes these “noncanonical” literatures.

Moreover, Jameson’s definition of what is “noncanonical” seems to hinge not only on what is excluded from the canon, but on its failure to “offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce” (65). In this regard, he counts third world literature as “sub-genre” alongside the detective novels of “Dashiell Hammett,” despite the fact that a work of literature’s place of origin affords no clues to its genre. “Many arguments can be made for the importance and interest of noncanonical forms of literature such as that of the third world,” says Jameson, “but one is peculiarly self-defeating because it borrows the weapons of the adversary: the strategy of trying to prove that these texts are as ‘great’ as those of the canon itself” (65). Such “strategies,” I agree, attempt only to erase difference, and refuse to judge a “sub-genre” text on its own merits. Non-white/Western/male writers and artists are constantly compared to the “classics,” the “canon,” in a misguided attempt to legitimize them.

Still, labeling such writers and texts “sub-genre” seems only to reinforce the literary ‘realness’ and true “greatness” of the canon. Jameson urges the (ostensibly white, male, etc) American intellectual to read outside of the canon, and to recognize that in our world of mass culture we are in fact constantly engaging with texts that do not conform to standards of greatness. In doing so, however, he does not appear to suggest that we problematize the canon and the idea of what is “great” itself. Aside from my qualms about the designation of “third world” as “subgenre,” Jameson is unrelenting in his characterization of “third world” as “unmodern,” “outmoded,” in its lack of separation between public and private.

Jameson does takes care to point out that his notion of national allegory is not merely a

system of simplistic, one-to-one correspondences but “profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities [...] rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol” (73). He waves away impending cries of “orientalism,” saying, “it is clear to me that any articulation of radical difference [...] is susceptible to appropriation by that strategy of otherness,” but “one of our basic political tasks lies precisely in the ceaseless effort to remind the American public of the radical difference of other national situations” (77). I can agree with Jameson here, in that those in positions of power and comfort find it difficult to relate to or imagine the situation of others and there is indeed a pressing need to shake the first world out of its self-contained reverie. Of course there is no use in telling ourselves that there is no difference whatsoever between peoples and nations.

Even so, he seems to believe that “the daily reality of the other two-thirds of the globe” is overcome with nothing but pain and suffering (and to pat himself on the back for being able to confront this) (86). Perhaps we should not judge Jameson too harshly, what with his good intentions and his robust efforts to evidence his own self-awareness of his theory’s faults. Nonetheless, though his work may have inspired the West to take note of marginalized, oppressed and repressed literatures, his acknowledgement of their “radical *difference*” to those of the “first world”—despite his hedging and protestations against “homogeneity” and “otherness”—is, at its core, all-encompassing: “*all* third-world texts are *necessarily* [...] allegorical” (69). In any case, Jameson’s theory presents a compelling framework through which to examine critically issues of authenticity, community, and canon in contemporary Asian American literature.

**“A Silent, Communal Speech”:
Questions of Collectivity in Lee**

Lee, more so than Mori, deals concretely with problems of language and communication. Mama and the narrator of “Swell Doughnuts” can express all that needs to be expressed in a simple nod, and A.M. and Mori himself, in “Hawaiian Note,” are “members of a group who translate with a wordless language” (142). Silence, for them, somehow does more work than words can. Nonetheless, it seems that no language barrier prevents them from understanding one another's speech when they do decide to talk to one another. Lee's silences, rather, are often indicative of linguistic shortcomings, painful evidence of failures to express or distances that cannot be bridged. Remembering the atmosphere of his mother's final days, he writes: “No one is speaking. Except for the babble of her machines the will of silence reigns in this house. There is no sound, no word or noise, that we might offer up to fill this place” (85). Here silence exists as a profound emptiness, a lack—something “to be filled,” or unable to be.

At the same time, however, speech and sound can be equally alienating. People come by the house to “say prayers and sing hymns,” but Lee is excluded from this moment of shared support, love, and grief. Unable to understand “the high Korean words,” in fact “not know[ing] many at all,” he tells us, “the music of their songs does not comfort me” (86). He describes some of the singers as “complete strangers,” most likely not only to him but to one another—and yet they remain “one voice,” “one broad voice” (86). They are bonded by virtue of the Korean language and ethnicity, but he cannot participate in “their one broad voice,” even as it dedicates itself to “sing[ing] and pray[ing] over” his own dying mother. Accordingly, he can only guess at the meaning of what this voice is expressing; it only “*seems* to be calling, beckoning something, bared in some kind of sad invitation” (86).

“It is an acknowledgement,” he continues, declaratively but no less vaguely. Ultimately,

he does not and cannot know what they are acknowledging, what sort of “invitation” they are extending; his comprehension of their song can only go so far. They “sing too loud,” he thinks, and must be “hurting” or “disturbing” his mother, but it seems that his own alienation must be part of the problem here (86). To him, not understanding the words, perhaps the song is mere noise, but he strangely assumes that it affords his mother no comfort as well.

In fact, he is “glad when they are finished,” more relieved when they stop than he is moved by their music—but at the same time, “though [he] wanted them earlier to cease [he] know[s] already how quiet and empty it will feel when they are gone” (86). Their song is meaningless, even irritating, to Lee as a monolingual English speaker, yet in its “quiet and empty” absence he almost yearns for it to begin again. As the singers leave the room, “the minister’s wife [...] wants to say something to [him] but [he] can see from her stunted expression that the words will not come” (86). The speechlessness of the minister’s wife is again emblematic of an inability to express, a dead end; “the words will not come” no matter how much she wants to speak them. The silences early in his piece, too, all point to the pain of loss and the taboo of acknowledging someone’s imminent death: the minister’s wife has “tears in her eyes,” which he takes to mean that “it is that clear” just how little time his mother has left. Despite these “empty,” melancholy, and “stunted” emotions and images Lee associates with silence, however, the hushed scene that follows is profoundly transformative:

We are all close together now in the foyer, touching hands and hugging each other, our faces flushed, not talking but assenting to what we know, moving our lips in a silent, communal speech. For what we know, at least individually, is still unutterable, dwelling peacefully in the next room as the unnameable, lying there and waiting beside her, and yet the feeling among us is somehow so formidable and full of hope, and I think if I could hear our thoughts going round the room they would speak like the distant report of ten thousand monks droning the long life of the earth. (86)

He cannot take part in this community in song—in no way can he be a part of it when the Korean words are involved. The hymns do not comfort him and the minister's wife alone, with her “stunted” silence, can offer no solace either. Yet somehow, as everyone enters the foyer, they are “close together now,” both physically—hands touching, hugging, bodies against one another—and emotionally. In this moment, Lee is able to enter into this community, and seemingly only can under the condition of silence, which at least in this instance does away with the barrier of language. Somehow, too, their silence is something other than itself, and something they can share in with one another: it is, bizarrely, a “silent, communal *speech*.” Rather than working to separate individuals (or evidence their separation), the absence of language here brings everyone together, in a Mori-esque fashion. It communicates something, even as they are “not talking but assenting to what they know.” Whereas when the others sing Lee is not privy to what they acknowledge or what they invite, here there is something they all recognize and understand—and all acknowledge in their “silent, communal speech.”

However, it is still unclear what constitutes this “communal speech,” as well as what it is that they “know.” Like Mori, Lee presents silence as a meaningful form of communication, but complicates the question of what it is to “speak” yet further. Lee states that everyone is “moving their lips,” but not speaking; at the same time, they are speaking, but without words. What they “know individually is still unutterable,” but “what they know” as a whole is also unutterable. The reader is not told what they know individually, but is not shown and does not know their “communal” knowing either. Moreover, their “speech,” of course, is “silent.” Perhaps “what they know,” even as a unit, cannot be spoken—perhaps what is shared and understood in silence can remain only in silence. Even so, Lee purposefully tells us that their “individual” knowing in particular is “unutterable.” What is it, then, to “utter?” What is it to “speak,” when silence

becomes its own form of “speech?”

Jameson tells us that the third world citizen is necessarily representative of the collective; here, the distinction between the “individual” and the “communal” is indeed greatly blurred. Their “communal speech” is silent, and their “individual” knowing is unutterable and “unnameable,” thus also relegated to silence by default. However, we actually are given more of an idea of what this “unnameable” thing is than what they collectively know and “assent to.” “What we know, at least individually,” Lee says, “is still unutterable, dwelling peacefully in the next room as the unnameable, lying there and waiting beside her.” This “unutterable” knowing—“dwelling peacefully in the next room,” “lying there and waiting beside” his mother—is seemingly the specter of death, which is associated with silence throughout “Faintest Echo.” Despite the fact that this “individual” knowing is unnamed and unuttered, it is still described with more specificity than is their “communal speech.” Furthermore, even this individual knowing is something shared—and something singular, seemingly the same thing for everyone. It is what “we” know, “individually.”

“Yet,” Lee writes, “the feeling *among us* is somehow so formidable and full of hope.” It is clear that this sense of community in silence is a source of strength, a stay against despair—that it offers the sort of comfort the prayers and hymns could not. Perhaps this is in part because Lee, as an uncomprehending outsider listening to the songs, is stuck in a “placeless individuality” (Jameson 85). The distinction between the individual and communal “knowing” may be a blurry one, but there is a clear demarcation in the “hope” community affords. Interestingly, in this iteration he refers to “the *feeling* among us,” rather than anything “known,” before shifting to “thoughts,” and again to speech: “If I could hear our thoughts going round the room they would speak like the distant report of ten thousand monks droning the long life of the earth.” These

shared feelings and thoughts, rather than individuals, could “speak”—and this “speech,” too, would be wordless, “distant” and “droning” but powerful.

Lee’s alienation from those singing Korean hymns in his family home indicates that shared nationality and ethnicity does not always impart some mutual experience, mentality, or understanding. Their “singular voice” perhaps hints at this idea of allegory: that each of the singers is a stand-in for the whole, that each of their voices ultimately speaks for them all (86). Yet Lee, as an individual, despite having the same nation of “origin,” clearly does not—and cannot—“laboriously” tell “the experience of the collectivity itself” (Jameson 86). His experience of Korean American-hood is its own. Likewise, the fact that their singular voice does not include his own tells us that the collective the singers represent is not emblematic of all Korean Americans.

His piece poignantly evidences the slipperiness of the idea of collectivity and of these two disparate worlds, with Lee himself and his mother—their relationship the crux of the essay—likewise in vastly different positions. As a speaker of English, Lee is closer to the “first world” than is his mother. Her painful childhood in Korea under Japanese colonization, during which she could speak her native language only under cover of night within the walls of her own home, dovetails with the powerlessness she experiences in the United States, where her son must “negotiate *us*,” “do the work of voice” (88). The first world is typically allied with the West, but we see clearly here that such designations are flawed. Jameson harnesses the work of just one Chinese writer (Lu Xun) and one Senegalese writer (Ousmane) to elucidate his theory about the third world at large, but the history of a family like Lee’s indicates the complicated dynamics of power that exist even without Europe and America in the picture. The great differences between the trajectories of Lee and his mother confirm, too, the multiplicity of the “Asian American

experience.”

And yet, at the end of his piece, Lee seems to attempt to speak for them both, perhaps even for Asian Americans in general, or for anyone caught between languages and worlds: “I am here to speak. Say the words. [...] You may die, but you will have been heard. Keep speaking—it is real. You have a voice” (92). And still in silence he and the singers “speak” together, the lack of communication their “communal speech” (86). There are no easy answers here.

“An Authentic Short Story”: Canon, Content, Representation

Issues of canon, nation, and representation—as well as, again, meaningful silence—arise when Lee recounts the early stories he wrote as a teenager:

I never dreamed of them. Imagined them. I remember writing short stories in high school with narrators or chief characters or unidentified race and ethnicity. Of course this meant they were white, everything in my stories was some kind of white, though I always avoided physical descriptions of them or passages on their lineage and they always had cryptic first names like Garlo or Kram.

Mostly, though, they were figures who (I thought) could appear in an authentic short story, belong to one, that no reader would notice anything amiss in them, as if they’d inhabited forever those visionary landscapes of tales and telling, where a snow still falls faintly over all of Joyce’s Ireland, that great muting descent, all over Hemingway’s Spain, and Cheever’s Suburbia, and Bellow’s City of Big Shoulders.

I was to breach that various land, become its finest citizen and furiously speak in dialects. And it was only with one story I wrote back then, in which the character is still unidentified but his mother is Asian (maybe even Korean), that a cleaving happened. That the land broke open at my feet. At the end of the story, the protagonist returns to his parents’ home after a long journey [...] and his mother tends to him [...] They do not speak; she simply knows that he is home. (90)

Jameson allies national allegory, the collapsing of public and private, the individual standing in for the state, and so forth with the literature of the “third world.” According to his emphasis on

the “placeless individuality” of the first world, we might think that “third world” characters would belong more concretely to their respective “places” than white characters do. To the young Chang-Rae Lee, however, it was protagonists of “unidentified race and ethnicity” (thus “some kind of white”) that “authentically” “inhabited forever those visionary landscapes of tales and telling.” Here Lee concretely associates nation and place, both real and fictional, with the canonical texts of the first world. “Joyce” (who Jameson cites alongside Proust as height of the canon) is linked inextricably with his “Ireland,” Hemingway” with his “Spain,” “Cheever” with “Suburbia,” and “Bellow” with the “City of Big Shoulders.” The first world is somehow both “individualized” as Jameson argues—unhinged from history—and yet definitively located and collectivized. Lee hints, too, at the strange universality of whiteness: the same “muting descent” falls “over all of Joyce’s Ireland,” “all over Hemingway’s Spain,” “Suburbia,” and “the City of Big Shoulders” alike. First-world whiteness, it seems, is not truly “placeless,” particularly within literature. Or, if whiteness is indeed “placeless,” this indicates that it is also never “out of place.”

Meanwhile, the appearance of the third-world subject in first world literature is jarring—somehow marked and “amiss,” somehow “inauthentic.” As Ahmad points out, Jameson leaves out in his theory those who are effectively between these two worlds. These characters (and individuals) are “placeless” in another way: belonging neither to the literature of the first or the third world altogether. Yet Lee’s anxieties around “authenticity” speak also to the Jamesonian notion that any specific story of “difference” or marginalization “cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (86). Under such reasoning, every individual experience can be generalized and extrapolated to the whole, no matter how particular it may be. Ahmad laments that the “retribution visited upon the head of an

Asian, an African, an Arab intellectual who is of any consequence and who writes in English is that he/she is immediately elevated to the lonely splendor of a ‘representative’—of a race, a continent, a civilization, even the Third World” (5). At the same time, though, these ideas reflect the pressure that a writer of color may feel to represent “everyone,” and to be seen as “authentic” and “ethnic” enough. Ironically, this desire to write the nonwhite experience “authentically” often backfires into self-exotification, particularly in popular Asian American texts—and often results in pandering to a white audience, rather than depicting “reality” (Akhtar).

In a way, Jameson’s theory is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Much of third-world literature, including Asian American literature, may be political and issue-driven rather than form-driven. Even so, by asserting that all third-world literature “is” national allegory, where does this leave work that is not explicitly political? Is it then either not truly “third world”—or not truly “literature?” Karissa Chen, Chinese American writer and editor of the Asian American literary publication *Hyphen*, has discussed a dilemma many Asian American authors face: “I wasn’t sure if I was ‘allowed’ to write anything outside of certain themes (you know the ones I’m talking about — immigration stories, generational differences, identity politics) and still be considered an Asian American writer” (Callahan). “In fact,” she continues, “I think I actively resisted having my writing labeled as ‘Asian American literature’ because it connoted a particular type of story I didn’t want to be pigeonholed as writing” (Callahan).

The problem is not simply that all Asian American literature “is” a certain way, or even that there are extenuating factors and historical baggage which cause it to be “unmodern” and lack the degree of artfulness inherent to Joyce or another member of the canon. Jameson, in declaring that all non-“dominant” literature is “necessarily” this way reiterates, or perhaps has even played a role in creating and upholding, the persistent belief even among Asian American

writers that all Asian American literature is and *must be* political, about identity, about struggle and so forth. His first/third world dichotomy, too, only serves to add fuel to the fire of the identity crisis present in so many novels: the question of what it is to be Asian in a “white world” (Akhtar). First-world, capital-L “Literature” supposedly transcends issues of race; to become too “political” is not literary. As Junot Díaz puts it, “anyone that trie[s] to introduce racial consciousness to the Great (White) Universal of Literature [is] seen as politicizing the Pure Art and betraying the (White) Universal (no race) ideal of True Literature” (“MFA vs. POC”). Yet the label of “Asian American Literature,” for example, seems to come with the constraint that racial and ethnic identity must be at the core of the work. Even if the writer does not focus on such matters, merely by featuring characters of color she may well still be accused of dwelling on “race issues.” (Meanwhile, the writer who deals only with white subject matter is never accused of such a thing, as if “white” is not a racial identity at all.)

With the shelving of Mori’s *Yokohama, California*, we can see how Asian American works have been silenced and excluded; by examining the thought process of the teenage writer Lee, we can see how this silencing often occurs long before the publishing world comes into play. “I never dreamed of them,” Lee says, never “imagined them,” implicitly referring to stories featuring characters that were Asian American like himself. Not only do such nonwhite characters belong neatly neither to first world literature nor to third but seem to have no place in literature, period. By virtue of their color or ethnicity, they are too loaded with historical baggage to “inhabit forever those visionary landscapes of tales and telling,” confined instead to only the most limited and repetitive of storylines and concerns if any at all. Díaz has spoken, too, about the lack of representation of Latino/a and immigrant characters in fiction, and the dehumanizing result:

You guys know about vampires? [...] You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to *make* a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all. (Donohue)

By way of this “vampire” metaphor, Diaz vividly addresses the greater consequences of the overwhelming whiteness of American media. Denied any “reflection” of oneself in culture, one can all too easily not only feel unworthy of a place in the world of art and fiction, but also feel less human than one’s white peers.

**“Belonging in a Story”:
Akhil Sharma’s *Family Life***

Akhil Sharma’s *Family Life* (2014), an autobiographical (but fictional) text like Lee’s, also deals with silence brought on by loss, as well as canon and representation in an Asian American context. The Mishra family of the novel immigrates to the United States from India when their sons Ajay and Birju are eight and twelve respectively. After an accident two years later leaves his brother severely and irrevocably brain-damaged, Ajay has no means through which to express his pain. Ajay finally tells a schoolmate, Jeff, about his family’s situation, because, he explains, “I was so unhappy, because everything was terrible, and because I had thought that if I told him about Birju, he would pity me and become my friend” (100). In the end, however, he is left only with “the feeling [that he] had wasted something” (100).

Attempting to curry the level of sympathy he feels he and his brother deserve—to “explain that what had happened to [Birju] was awful, was the worst thing in the world”—he begins to tell lie after lie about Birju’s impressive accomplishments before the accident (104). Soon enough, his classmates catch on to his lying streak and start to ignore him, prompting Ajay

instead to grab their attention with the grotesque truth. He describes how the nurse's aides shave his brother's body and attach his catheter; how the G-tubes in his stomach sometimes make him bleed; the horrifying conditions of the nursing home and the horrifying situations that have brought the patients there. "Speaking the truth" makes him "feel powerful" (109). "To say the horrible truth and to know that [he] had seen unbearable things" makes him feel that he is "strong" and others are "weak" (110).

Yet speaking the truth produces even worse consequences than do his lies. He is met with violence, Jeff punching him in the stomach so that he falls to the ground. "You have to ignore people like that Jeff boy," says Ajay's father, "Expecting sympathy from somebody like that is like expecting sympathy from dirt" (113). Nonetheless, when mere pages later he goes to his father and tries to reach out to him, the response is no more validating (130):

August fifth was the second anniversary of Birju's accident. That morning, when I woke up, I lay on my side. I couldn't believe everything had changed because of three minutes.

One evening, not long after the anniversary, my father was sitting in Birju's room drinking tea. I came and stood next to him. I was very unhappy. My father must have sensed this. He patted my head quickly, and in his quickness I knew that there was both an acknowledgement of me and also a desire that I move away and not say anything. After a moment I said, "Daddy, I am so sad."

"You're sad?" my father said angrily. "I want to hang myself every day." (129-130)

At home around his parents, who are living through these tragic circumstances alongside him, Ajay still feels pressure to lie and pretend. When taking care of his brother, the family adopts a teasing tone, as if to normalize the situation and mimic the playful relationships they once had with him. "Hello, lazy! Hello, smelly!" yells Ajay's mother, and he follows suit: "Fatty, fatty," I said. I smiled and wagged my head. Pretending to be younger than I was, too young to notice Birju's gruesomeness, always seemed the proper way to behave" (101). Despite

the fact that this behavior is in an attempt to make these horrific experiences easier to withstand, at least for Ajay, it does not preclude his anxiety and sadness. Instead, it seems to emphasize it. “I smiled. I walked boldly. I was nervous,” he says: “Because I was pretending to be cheerful, I assumed [my mother] was acting, too” (117). “Pretending” and “acting”—“smiling” and “walking boldly”—do nothing to change the fact that he is “nervous” inside or that he does, in fact, “notice” his brother’s “gruesomeness.”

Ajay and his parents, of course, cannot communicate with Birju nor receive any response; they “yell,” “shout,” and speak not to anyone in particular. His father “leaned down and said into Birju’s ear. ‘Why are you so heavy? Are you getting up at night and eating? You are, aren’t you? Admit it. I see crumbs on your chin’” (116-117). The strange period after “said,” where we would expect a comma or colon, accentuates the strangeness of their utterances: the fact that they do not speak “to” Birju. Of course, Ajay and his parents are speaking to—and for the sake of—one another. Ajay does what “seems the proper way to behave.” He laughs at his father’s joke, “smiles,” and “chatters” on, for he “wished it to appear that [he] wasn’t seeing what was occurring before [him]” (118). But while his unending stream of speech is an attempt to reassure his parents that he is too young to notice the grotesque, as well as to distance himself from what is happening, he is well aware of the “grey water and flecks of shit” streaming into the tub as they bathe Birju; the way he “jerks” unconsciously at the sound of their shouts (118). The effort he spends “pretending” paradoxically only makes the “gruesome,” unacknowledged truth of his brother’s condition more painful.

Even alone with his brother, Ajay continues to keep up his juvenile banter, to excruciating effect:

It was the first day of seventh grade and I had just come home. I saw my brother and began screaming. ‘Hello, fatty! Hello, smelly!

Who have you been bothering today?' [...] I was grinning. 'Do you think of anybody but yourself?' I shouted. 'In my life I have never met anyone so selfish.' [...] 'Smelly! Smelly!' I shouted. I didn't know why I was screaming. I felt possessed. (131)

He “sees his brother and begins screaming,” as though the mere sight of him inspires a Pavlovian response; feeling “possessed,” he does not know why he is screaming nor can he stop. The narrative feels flattened and zoomed-out, as if Ajay is watching himself from far away: “I was grinning,” he states, as if describing a photograph. He has no audience—no other conscious party to “pretend” for is present—but automatically reverts to the yelling and chattering he performs for his mother and father. As Ajay speaks, he is tormented by the way he and his brother’s lives have diverged from one another, wracked with guilt about “his good luck of being OK” (132). He chatters on, recounting the mundane particulars of “the first day of seventh grade” and feigning envy that his brother gets to lie in bed all day, but “the more I talked,” he says, “the more scared I got. It was as if my own voice was pumping fear into me” (131).

As Ajay speaks, he has “the feeling that” he is “being watched,” “the sense that some man” is “looking at him” and that this man “knows” he is “not very good” (133). He “begins speaking in an even more childish voice” to counter his feelings of guilt and unease, unable to utter anything aloud without fear of retribution (132). Speech in *Family Life* is always an opportunity for judgment, for “blame”; Ajay can never truly be himself in his spoken language. No matter the circumstances, he must “pretend,” be “melodramatic,” make himself “sound ridiculous, like a child” (131). “Talking, talking, talking,” he does “slowly begin to get calmer,” but at the expense of this “pretending” (132). Attempting to retain the relationship he once had with his brother, too, necessitates playing a role he had in a past that can never truly be recovered.

Speech, for Ajay, is a dead end. Each time he tries to voice his true experiences and emotions, whether at school or at home, he is dismissed in one way or another. Writing,

meanwhile, offers him a way out of his sorrow. Fourteen-year-old Ajay, like the teenage Chang-Rae Lee, has in the past only “written stories about white people, because white people’s stories seemed to matter more” (158). Sharma himself has stated that all of his early writing as a child and teenager was about “white people doing white people stuff even though [he] hadn’t even been in a white person’s house until [he] was in high school” (Hoover). “I wrote about white people,” he says, “because that’s just what I thought fiction was” (Hoover). Beyond the idea of literature itself concerning itself only with white stories, Ajay confesses that he “hadn’t known how to write about Indians” (158). How would one “translate,” for instance, “the various family relations, the difference between an uncle who is a father’s brother and an uncle who is a mother’s brother?” (158).

However, unlike Lee, who measures himself up against the canon—Joyce, Hemingway, and the like—and feels that he must (at least at first) erase his own identity to compare, discovering Hemingway’s work allows Ajay to find a way into writing about his own experiences. “As I kept reading Hemingway, who seemed to so value suffering in silence,” he says, “I began to see my family’s pain as belonging in a story” (157). Paradoxically enough, it is a bastion of so-called canonical literature, perhaps the most beloved American writer, whose style and subject matter enables him to see his own “belonging” in the world of fiction. Here again we see the barrier between first-world and third-world literature being broken down.

Despite the fact that Ajay and his family are fairly new arrivals to America, part of a then-tiny community of other recent Indian immigrants in 1980s New York, something within him still resonates with the first-world Hemingway. At the same time, Hemingway’s first-world status is complicated as well. “Suffering in silence,” a state so often attributed to Asian American communities (and one Ajay attributes to his own family) is core to Hemingway’s values—and to

the experiences he sees worthy of writing about (157). Hemingway today is often lambasted on counts of racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism, but his stories also explore trauma, alienation, difference, and language in ways that connect with audiences beyond that of the straight white Christian and capitalist male. *Family Life*, too, has to do with much more than the question Pakistani American novelist Jabeen Akhtar argues is core to nearly every South Asian identity crisis, and “ridiculous”: “Why am I brown in a white world?”

Akhtar has criticized the tendency of South Asian American writers and their publishers to “pander to the white audience,” either by clinging to tired stereotypes or “[piling] on exposition about culture, politics, and history to fill in knowledge gaps.” She cites Dostoevsky, Marquez, and Achebe as “non-Anglo Saxon classics” who “unapologetically” refuse to make their fiction relatable or easily comprehensible to Western readers. In *Family Life*, Hemingway serves as a perhaps surprising inspiration for Ajay. Apart from allowing him to feel his “belonging in a story,” reading Hemingway also provides Ajay with the tools to write about his own “difference” in a way that avoids stereotype or over-explanation (157).

Having read Hemingway’s novels and short stories as well as critical work on him, Ajay now knows “that [he] should just push all the exotic things to the side as if they didn’t matter, that this was how one used exoticism—by not bothering to explain” (158). The “first story” he writes with this new understanding is about being woken by the sound of his brother coughing in the middle of the night: “To be woken this way and not be able to return to sleep struck me as sad enough to merit a reader’s attention,” but “also, Hemingway had written a story about a man being woken because somebody is dying nearby, and the man is forced to witness the death” (158). He begins the story “in the middle of the action the way Hemingway did,” without bothering to comfortably situate the reader (158). Hemingway’s stories, rather than again making

him feel that his Indian family and his brother's vegetative state have no place in literature, help him see his own "belonging in story," and a way in to writing itself.

Ajay makes his first story about a husband and wife rather than two brothers, but whereas lying in speech causes him chaos and produces profound guilt, transforming the real into fiction has a far different result. Speaking the truth, even when it feels cathartic, makes him feel "powerful" in comparison to others only because he has seen and been through the "unbearable"—and in doing so, he can only re-affirm how unbearable it all has been. His self-worth, so doing, becomes conflated with all of the pain he has experienced. Conversely, "to write something down and for that thing to come into existence" is to move beyond pain, to create a new way of being and feeling: "The fact that the sentence existed made Birju's coughing somehow less awful" (159). Ajay's "pretending," childish speech and his mother and father's banter, which we might expect to make this bizarre family life more tolerable, only exacerbate its terror. To "write something down," rather, truly makes reality more bearable—not perfect but "somehow less awful." Ajay imagines Birju dying, as "this had to be what would eventually happen" (159). "As soon as I imagined this," he tells us, "I did not want him gone. I felt a surge of love for Birju. Even though he was sick and swollen, I did not want him gone" (159). Rather than guilt, rather than that something has been "wasted," writing allows him to feel the enormity of his "love" (100).

"At the idea of writing sentences that contained our suffering," he experiences "both the triumph that [he] had felt when [he] told Jeff and Michael Bu about Birju, and also a sort of detachment, like [he] was watching [his] own life" (157). "Writing the story changes" Ajay—"Now I began to feel as if I were walking through my life collecting things that could be used later," he tells us, "Seeing things as material for writing protected me" (160). In an uncertain and

terrifying world, living a family life full of loss and confusion, writing is for him a way of exercising control. “Seeing things as material” protects Ajay from being hurt by the situations that occur; instead, he can see them as useful, as interesting. This “detachment,” which “telling” does not enable in the same way as writing, may have negative consequences. *Family Life*, in my view, could ultimately be seen as a novel about detachment. After all, it ends with an adult, Princeton and Harvard Law-educated millionaire Ajay smiling at his beautiful girlfriend by the pool. “I got happier and happier,” but “the happiness was almost heavy,” he says: “That was when I knew I had a problem” (218). Only after years and years does he finally feel the weight of everything he has been pushing aside—but it seems to mean something, too, that Sharma, who was himself a hyper-successful investment banker, left this path to go into the literary world.

Writing is not merely about “detachment”; the other side of it is creation. Like silence—and unlike the young Ajay’s frantic speech—it is a way of confronting the unsayable, not only running from it. The act of writing this story about Birju in the middle of the night allows Ajay to step back and to feel both his love and sadness without guilt. He can confront the idea of his brother’s eventual death without being consumed by it. He can envision how life could be different—perhaps even change the trajectory that it takes. In writing, he is not confined to a kind of stunted “pretending” that can only reinforce his aloneness and confusion. His desperate “shouts” and “chattering,” though loud and unceasing, express little, persisting in making a show of feigned obliviousness; writing, meanwhile, can “contain” his suffering (157). Some “things in my life, though, were too undignified and strange to be converted into literature,” he says—but then, by providing the example of how his father would steal grass from nearby housing developments, “either because [he] did not believe that grass could be considered property or because he did not wish to believe this,” proceeds to do just that (157). *Family Life*, in its frank

and unsentimental acknowledgement of the “undignified and strange,” challenges our ideas of what literature is—and what it can do.

**“My Own Beginning and Lonely Language”:
Writing as Silence, Writing as Speech**

Lee’s “Faintest Echo” has a similar perspective on the significance of writing, as opposed to speech. He and his mother’s exchanges are necessarily stunted by virtue of their feeble grasp of one another’s languages. “This will be our language always,” he says:

To me she speaks in a child’s Korean, and for her I speak that same child’s English. We use only the simplest words. I think it strange that throughout this dire period we necessarily speak like this. Neither of us has ever grown up or out of this language; by virtue of speech I am forever her perfect little boy, she my eternal righteous guide. We are locked in a time. I love her, and I cannot grow up. [...] And although I wonder if our union is handicapped by it I see also the minute discoveries in the mining of the words.
(91)

Ajay’s childish words and childish voice are an attempt to keep his relationship with his brother the way it once was, and to avoid “blame.” “Possessed” by the juvenile screams bursting out of him seemingly not of his own accord, he, too, cannot “grow up or out of this language.” He finds himself stuck in a past to which he can never return. Those three minutes Birju spent at the bottom of the pool cannot be changed or recovered. Though playing this child-self is at turns a disturbing and a “calming” experience for him, this “calm” is an unsustainable one: as time passes it will only become harder and harder to pretend. As for Lee and his mother, their speech, deeply limited instead by their lack of linguistic knowledge, likewise “locks” them “in a time.” This, of course, is not all negative. He is forever the “perfect little boy,” she forever the “righteous guide.” There are the “minute discoveries” in the “mining” of unfamiliar words and sounds, there is unending, simple “love.” Yet there are things that they simply do not have the

words to share with one another. It is for this reason, it seems, that the only story he writes as a teenager that manages to “break” the land “open,” is the one in which an Asian mother and son “do not speak,” but “simply know” what the other is trying to express (90).

Just as Sharma writes in order to process his brother’s condition, Lee grapples with his mother’s illness and death through fiction. “This cancer, this happening, this time,” he says, is the “cruel sculpture of our life and our family” (92). He describes the very experience of observing the long decline of a family member as a sort of act of writing. “Each of us in this room has been elaborating upon [the story] from the very moment we gained knowledge of her illness,” he says, “I think we have written, each of us, the somber epic novel of her death. It has taken two and one-half years and we are all nearly done” (91). His father and sister, he imagines, “write” their own “endings” to comfort themselves, informed by their own relationships with her (91). Moreover, he refers self-consciously to his own obviously autobiographical essay as a “narrative,” and to himself as living within a “narrative moment.”

“In the ending to my own story,” says Lee, “my mother and I are alone”:

We are always alone. And one thing is certain; she needs to say something only to me. That is why I am there. Then she speaks to me, secretly. What she says exactly is unclear; it is enough, somehow, that she and I are together, alone, apart from everything else, while we share this as yet unborn and momentary speech. The words are neither in Korean nor in English, languages which in the end we cannot understand. I hear her anyway. (93)

In his “ending,” he and his mother can communicate as never before. “She needs to say something only to him,” but the words are seemingly not quite language: the “speech” is “unborn and momentary,” “the words neither in English nor Korean.” Again here Lee writes of a silent sort of speech, a speech not really of words or sounds. Its meanings, too, are hazy: “what she says exactly is unclear.” Yet he “hears her anyway,” and it is enough. By writing this alternative

ending as it were of his mother's death, he can imagine an interaction between them that could sidestep their linguistic barriers—one that frees them from the tyranny of these languages that keep them stuck forever in the same roles and the same time. Unlike their spoken exchanges, this act of “writing” can allow for an interaction wherein words are not quite words. His mother can finally express what she has always needed to say; he can finally “hear” it.

In reality, they are of course “not alone,” and both are “probably glad for this” (92). Yet what seems to be reality he too characterizes as just one “narrative”: “I think it is now that I must speak to her. I understand that I am not here to listen; that must be for *another* narrative” (92). And in this new narrative, his role is not to receive his mother's speech, but to be the speaker; he is “here to speak,” “say the words” (92). However, as the essay concludes, who is speaking becomes increasingly more unclear:

Her nearness has delivered me to this moment, an ever-lengthening moment between her breaths, that I might finally speak the words turning inward, for the first time, in my own beginning and lonely language: Do not be afraid. It is all right, so do not be afraid. You are not really alone. You may die, but you will have been heard. Keep speaking—it is real. You have a voice. (92)

“I might finally speak the words turning inward,” he says, but seems to be, in the process, imploring others to do so: “Keep speaking,” “you have a voice.” “You may die, but you will have been heard,” he states, ostensibly speaking to his mother, who in this moment is passing away. In writing his essay, Lee can affirm the “reality” of his mother's story and ensure that it does not go unheard. Yet his use of “you” blurs these lines, making it unclear whether he is speaking to himself, to his mother, to the reader, to all people caught in-between and navigating language, or whose stories are in danger of being silenced—or more than one of these. Whoever he “speaks” to, in his “own beginning and lonely language,” whoever “keeps speaking”: the fact

that he refers to all of this as a “narrative” implies that writing, not “speaking,” is the medium through which these stories can be told and these voices heard.

Writing, then, is perhaps the ultimate “silent, communal speech.” Yet it is in Lee’s “*own beginning and lonely language*” that he can finally “speak the words”: “you are not really alone.” Lee’s own language is particular and specific to himself, but it is for this reason that it is not doomed to “aloneness.” His “lonely” voice may in fact reassure others of their own place in a community. The idea of community or collective does present various problems; it erases the magnitude of difference and nuance within what are easier to think of as monolithic categories. We see here, however, that the idea of community does not necessarily have to override the identity of the individual. It is, in fact, the specificity of Lee’s story and history—the “loneliness” of his “beginning” language—that affirms the belonging of others.

Conclusion

The We Need Diverse Books initiative, which originated as a hashtag on Twitter in 2014 and is now a bonafide non-profit organization working to increase minority representation in literature, particularly in books written for children, was often on my mind as I wrote this chapter. Jennifer Pan’s recent essay on the Asian American Writer’s Workshop *The Margins*, “The Limits of Diversity,” explores “how the feel-good politics of multiculturalism have blinded the literary world to the roots of racial inequality,” and critiques the WNDB mission—harking back to Chae’s criticisms of “politically acquiescent” multiculturalism in her *Politicizing Asian American Literature*. “Diversity has largely replaced equality as the ultimate goal for many educational and workplace settings, including the book publishing world,” Pan points out: it has been “flattered into an entirely apolitical term,” with the “multiracial makeup” of schools, workplaces, government, and so forth doing little to effect real change.

“For years,” writes Jeff Chang in *Who We Be*, “good-willed people had believed in a conceit—perhaps it was multiculturalism’s core conceit—that if more people of color, women, and gays were represented, that if they could tell their stories and the stories were heard, then empathy would follow and equity, too” (Pan). Sharma, for one, has said that “books teach us to practice loving,” that “we read about imaginary characters and we learn to sympathize with strangers. This is an amazing thing” (Wray). I myself have felt similarly about reading and believe that fiction has without question broadened my perspective on the lives of others. In reality, however, surface-level institutional “diversity” has not led, for the most part, to great strides in equality. Meei-Ling Liaw cites Grice & Vaughn’s study on children’s reactions to books with African and African American themes:

Negative perception of African culture and tradition [... and] misconceptions have prevented children from appreciating books with African cultural themes [...] Merely purchasing these books for a school or public library or even reading and discussing them in class does not ensure that the literature will fulfill its intended purposes. (Liaw)

Diversity alone will not “fix” society, nor the literary establishment. As noted earlier in this chapter, much of popular Asian American literature panders to easily digestible stereotypes or promotes assimilationist narratives. Such works may only perpetuate inequality, by promoting what Chang and Chae see as a new multiculturalist consumerism that allows the educated and wealthy to feel “cultured” and as if they are doing their part to make change, while accomplishing little. Meanwhile, this new consumerism also capitalizes on the spending power of growing nonwhite populations. However, along with his belief in the ability of literature to foster empathy, Sharma also states that he “care[s] a great deal about being able to provide comfort to people who are in a similar situation to the one [he and his family] were in,” to “children in difficulty, the Indian immigrant community,” to those dealing with grave “illness”

(Wray). “We can read books [...] to not be alone,” he says, recalling the conclusion of Lee’s “Faintest Echo.” Both do not write for the approval of the white reader, or with the sole purpose of teaching white America that Asian Americans are people, too. Instead, they shed light on the reality of struggle without presenting their characters as passive victims; both focus on uplifting their own community without losing the humanity of the Asian American individual. Ultimately, I see Lee and Sharma, like Mori, as far from advocating “politically acquiescent” multiculturalism.

3

Rethinking “Beyond Black and White”:

Asian and African American Stereotypes and Solidarities

Introduction

My first two chapters have focused near-exclusively on the relationship between Asian Americans and white Americans—between canonical (i.e. white) literature and Asian American literature. However, Asian American literature’s initial breakthrough into mainstream and academic discourse was the result of a partnership with the African American literary community. I was interested to learn when I first began working on my project that *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), considered the seminal anthology of Asian American literature, was published through a traditionally black publisher, the Howard University Press. In present-day media, relations between Asian Americans and African Americans are often depicted either as non-existent, perfectly harmonious in recognition of shared struggle as “people of color,” or, most commonly, as wholly antagonistic.

The “model minority” status of Asian Americans, after all, has not only ignored Asian American oppression and the multiplicity of Asian American experience, but has also come at the expense of other nonwhite Americans, particularly black Americans. In fact, it was “at the height of the civil rights movement [...] when militant demands for social equality were being voiced by American racial minorities, led by American Blacks” that African Americans and Asian Americans were first pitted against one another in the news, with “a U.S. News and World Report article [holding] up the Chinese as example for Blacks and other ‘troublesome’ minority groups to follow” (Kim 177-178). For decades, “Asian achievement has been used against African Americans to bolster fictions of African American incompetence and laziness” (Karim 29).

The idea of the “model minority” has, in some ways, caused Asian Americans to be seen as “honorary white people.” However, in the past as well as today, Asians in America, along

with other nonwhite and nonblack minorities, have occupied an in-between space between blackness and whiteness, frequently shifting in the direction of one pole and the other. Leslie Bow's *Partly Colored* explores the "racial anomaly" of Asian Americans in the segregated South. "Not white" and "not black": where to sit on a bus, she asks, and which fountain to drink from? In her introduction, she quotes Japanese American civil rights activist Mary Tsukamoto recounting her "first trip out of camp" during World War II:

The bus ride to Jackson, Mississippi in 1943, she writes, "was shocking." [...] "We could not believe the bus driver's tone of voice as he ordered black passengers to stand at the back of the bus, even though there were many unoccupied seats in the front. We wondered what he would do with us, but he smiled and told us to sit in the seat behind him. We were relieved but had strange feelings; apparently we were not "colored." (Bow 2)

"But what exactly is 'not colored'?" asks Bow (2). Tsukamoto reads "the invitation to 'sit in the seat behind [the driver]'" as representing "a sign of favor." However, despite this seeming "favoritism," in "wondering what he would do with us," Tsukamoto "recognizes that she is required to submit to this representative of white authority who must, both literally and figuratively, put her in 'her place'" (2). Putting Japanese Americans at the front of the bus, Bow argues, "also ironically affords [the driver] the greatest possibility for surveillance, not a trivial point for a prisoner of war on a temporary furlough" (2).

I am not entirely convinced by Bow's "surveillance" argument, but one thing is certainly clear. Tsukamoto states that she and her companions "apparently were not 'colored.'" Nevertheless, the fact that the bus driver bestows upon them this designation (rather than it simply being a matter of course for an obviously "white" passenger)—that they must wait for him to make his decision—undercuts their supposed lack of "color." That the driver confers this favored, unmarked status upon them means also that it could easily be overturned or taken away

at any moment. What's more, being seen as "not colored" is both a "relief" and provokes "strange feelings" in Tsukamoto. Her "wonder" at what choice the bus driver would make leaves open the possibility of being read as "white" and being allowed to sit in the front; if she and the others were certain they would be perceived either as "white" or as "colored," there would be no reason to wonder. Even so, when they are asked to sit behind the driver, it is a "relief," implying that it is an unexpected turn of events, and one that seems to feel wrong. However they are compartmentalized by the white gaze, it is evident that Tsukamoto and the other Japanese American passengers see themselves as "colored." Particularly in the context of the historical moment, as "enemy aliens," as internees, how could they not be?

It is apparent that Asian Americans do not consider themselves white, and despite their presumed "honorary white" status, it seems obvious that neither do white people consider them equals. Yet the Asian American experience as people of color is obviously far different from that of black Americans. "Racist discourse [...] frequently accords a hypervisibility to African Americans and a relative *invisibility* to Asian Americans," writes Ruth Frankenberg in her study of whiteness and racial attitudes held by white women (12). "Needless to say," she continues, "neither mode of racism is more desirable, or more unpleasant in its effects, than the other" (12). In reality, however, we can see that black Americans face forms of violence and discrimination that are rarely directed towards the majority of Asians. Laurence Ralph and Kerry Chance cite African American philosopher Lewis Gordon in their "Legacies of Fear: From Rodney King's Beating to Trayvon Martin's Death." He argues that "the spotlight on black criminality" and the supposed "illicit appearance" of black people, "becomes so intense as to be blinding: hypervisibility leads to invisibility, 'where to see a black [person] as such means there is nothing more to be known, seen, or learned'" (Ralph 140). Despite the "hypervisibility" of the black

body, the humanity of black people—and the structural oppression of black Americans—is made invisible.

The impact of black hypervisibility and simultaneous invisibility is seen not only in the violent eyes and actions of the white viewer, but in the perceptions and reactions of Asian Americans as well. Gordon begins his article on this “illicit appearance” with an anecdote, describing the shocked, uncomfortable reaction of strangers to an embrace between himself and a Korean American friend in 1994 Los Angeles. He explains that this display of shock towards black-Asian friendship was influenced by the fact “that the value of black life was deeply insulted” when Korean “shopowner Soon Ja Du did no prison time” for shooting black 15-year-old Latasha Harlins, assuming that she planned on stealing a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice, two weeks after the beating of Rodney King. Harlins died unarmed, holding \$2 in her hand, and yet the judge concluded that Du’s “reaction,” though “inappropriate,” was “understandable,” and sentenced her to no jail time (“Grocer Given Probation”).

Du’s fear was not without precedent: “in September 1986 alone, four Korean merchants were murdered during robberies in South Los Angeles, and 15 were killed in the 18 months before Harlins’s death,” and “many Korean businesses were attacked” during the ensuing riots in 1992 (Monroe). Yet while Du’s fear was “legally affirmed,” Harlins’ own fear of Du, and the violent and discriminatory practices of Korean American business owners against black customers, was “declared irrelevant” (Monroe). Meanwhile, also in 1991, Brendan Sheen, a fellow Korean immigrant, “was sentenced to 30 days in jail for kicking his dog,” suggesting to many that in the eyes of the legal system, the animal’s life had more value than did Harlins’ (Monroe).

The model minority myth does not apply equally to all Asian Americans, and persistent

stereotypes about what it means to be Asian American are damaging to both Asians and other minorities. Nonetheless, I find it important to address these tensions, and to stress the role that anti-blackness has played in garnering Asian Americans this bittersweet designation. As Toni Morrison argues, “a hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open” (Bow 10). “Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American,” she continues: “It doesn’t matter anymore what shade the newcomer’s skin is” (Morrison). Not all Asian Americans have sought out or embraced the label of “model minority,” but all Asian Americans have arguably benefited from it, in the same way that white privilege is present in the lives of even the poorest “Euro”-Americans. Assuming “a hostile posture toward” black people has been an integral part of the long and arduous journey towards being accepted as true citizens of the United States. African Americans are hypervisible, Asian Americans comparatively invisible; “Our present function as a minority is to be not black,” writes Frank Chin, “the method of being not-black is to make a lot of silence for all the noise the blacks make” (“Racist Love” 75).

Gordon cautions that it would be “a simplification to look back to [the 1992 L.A. riots] as fundamentally between Asian-Americans and African-Americans,” and I of course agree. Nor do I wish to present the experiences of Asian Americans and African Americans as lacking any commonality—or Asian American life as being free of racism and struggle. Asian Americans contend with their own invisibility, and “when Asian Americans *are* rendered visible, that visibility typically carries with it dangerous consequences” (Srikanth 53). Often either hypersexualized or desexualized, Asian Americans are “favored” but dehumanized in other ways, seen as perpetually foreign and potentially treacherous or treasonous. Moreover, “Asian American” is far from a monolithic term. Despite common conceptions of economic prosperity

among Asians in America, Hmong Americans, Cambodian Americans, and Laotian Americans have “startlingly high” poverty rates (37.8%, 29.3% , and 18.5% respectively, compared with 27.4% of black Americans in 2010) (Zhao, National Poverty Center). Their college graduation rates are likewise lower than those of African Americans (Nguyen). South Asian Americans, Muslims and Sikhs in particular, have faced numerous hate crimes and racially motivated attacks in the aftermath of 9/11 (“History of Hate”).

Moreover, there have been core moments of solidarity between Asian Americans and African Americans. Lawyer and activist Mari J. Matsuda writes on “yellow” as the “racial middle,” and its capacity to either fortify or break down white supremacy:

If white, as it has been historically, is the top of the racial hierarchy in America, and black, historically, is the bottom, will yellow assume the place of the racial middle? The role of the racial middle is a critical one. It can reinforce white supremacy if the middle deludes itself into thinking it can be just like white if it tries hard enough. Conversely, the middle can dismantle white supremacy if it refuses to be the middle, if it refuses to buy into racial hierarchy, and if it refuses to abandon communities of black and brown people, choosing instead to forge alliances with them. (150)

Throughout history, we can certainly see such “alliances.” Richard Aoki, along with several other Asians, was a member of the Black Panther Party, and activist Yuri Kochiyama was a close friend of Malcolm X, ultimately witnessing his assassination. Anirvan Chatterjee recently created a web project, “Beyond Gandhi and King: The Secret History of South Asian and African American Solidarity,” in an effort to showcase “the histories we were never taught”: the fact that “South Asians and African Americans have been standing up for each other for over a century.” The Asian American movement of the 70’s was, as a whole, founded on the back of the Civil Rights Movement of the 50’s and 60’s.

In this light, Howard University’s publishing of Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson

Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, et al.'s *Aiiieeeee!* may be seen as a natural extension of these solidarities. However, I find that even such seeming moments of solidarity in Asian American literature are rife with their own problems. The work of *Aiiieeeee!* editor Frank Chin is extremely reliant on racist stereotypes of black hypermasculinity and presents black culture as a means through which to make the male Asian American subject “whole.” Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* gesture towards visions of a post-race America, but the inadequacy of these visions—which are likewise oft-reliant on racial stereotype—problematize recent discourse and scholarship that seeks to “go beyond black and white.”

***Aiiieeeee!*: Frank Chin and Asian American Masculinity**

In the introduction to the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology, Chin expresses gratitude to the black literary and scholarly world. Their “understanding” and lack of apprehension or condescension toward Asian voices, he says, “sustained the spirit” of Asian American literature. “The blacks were the first to take us seriously,” writes Chin, “and sustained the spirit of many Asian American writers [...] it wasn’t surprising to us that Howard University Press understood us and set out to publish our book [...] They liked the English we spoke and didn’t accuse us of unwholesome literary devices” (Kim 174). “According to Chin and Wong,” African Americans “have been quicker to understand and appreciate the value of Asian American writing than whites,” in part because “they are not hampered by the racist assumption that Asian Americans cannot speak English well and therefore cannot be writers of American literature”—presumably informed by the use of dialect and non-standard English in works of African American literature (Kim 174).

Aiiieeeee!’s conception began in 1969, with Shawn Wong’s realization “one day that [he] was the only Asian American writer [he] knew in the world” (Partridge 92):

I went to my professors at Berkeley and asked them, and they couldn't name anyone. One professor said, 'Well you know there are these Tang Dynasty poets.' I looked up their work. I read Li Po and Du Fu. They wrote about drinking wine by the river and writing poetry to the moon and the willow trees and falling drunk in the water. It was the 1960s. I'd already done all of that. So I looked in the card catalogue. There was no subject for Asian American authors. 'Asian American' was a brand new term anyway. There were only Asian authors. I looked under American authors and there was nothing there. Somebody in the generation before me must have written something—anything. (92)

He later met Jeff Chan, a co-founder of the Asian American Studies program at San Francisco State University, who put him in touch with Frank Chin, who was Chinese and had published a short story. Chin and Wong went searching for Asian American works in used bookstores, because the majority were out of print, and “would go to the Asian section of the bookstore and look on the spine of the books for the very stereotypical bamboo lettering on the side” (93). One day they “ran into a book called *Yokohama, California* by Toshio Mori” (93). “We bought it for a quarter,” Wong recalls, “It was a real find for us [...] We thought, ‘Somebody *did* come before us and somebody *did* try to write about the same issues we’ve been struggling with” (93-94). Along with Mori, Chin and Wong also rediscovered John Okada’s *No-No Boy*, among other novels once forgotten and now seen as seminal works of Asian American literature. Though the Asian American literary tradition has existed since the nineteenth century, *Aiiieeeee!* was responsible for bringing such writers into the mainstream consciousness (Partridge).

Despite his key role in establishing the Asian American literary movement of the 70s, Frank Chin has long been a polarizing figure of Asian American literature. As mentioned in chapter one, the preface to *Aiiieeeee!* set out to define “authentic” Asian American literature in extremely limiting terms. Chin and his fellow editors (Lawson Fusao Inada among them) state that Asian American identity refers only to “Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and Filipino-Americans” (“Aiiieeeee!”). Furthermore, they “operate[d] on the premise that a true

Asian American sensibility is non-Christian, nonfeminine, and non-immigrant” (Sau-ling Wong 8). Chin has been criticized for his misogyny and homophobia; his concerns lie primarily in the emasculation of straight Asian men by white culture, without giving much thought to the queer community and the subjugation and objectification of Asian women.

Chin has been taken to task by various critics for his single-minded emphasis on the masculine point of view—and for viewing white men as the epitome of “manhood”—but not much has been said on how his views are informed by comparison with African American masculinity. According to Elaine H. Kim, who wrote some of the first scholarly work on Asian American literature, Chin believes that the “characterization of Asian Americans as a ‘model minority’ or ‘middleman minority’ is largely an attempt to rationalize the relationship between Black and white Americans, at the expense of both the Blacks and the Asians” (177). Furthermore, she says, he strives to work against the “favorable” vision of Asians as “more industrious, docile, and compliant” than black people (177). Even so, although he aggressively lambasts the white gaze, Chin himself seems consumed by it. He gratefully acknowledges his debt to black Americans as a writer, and his own focus on “yellow power” draws much from the black power movement, yet his conceptions of masculinity fall back on damaging stereotypes about black men, and Asian men, as originated and perpetuated by white society.

At times, Chin’s social critique is incisive; when he states that “the method of being not-black is to make a lot of silence for all the noise the blacks make,” it seems that he attempts to cast into question misconceptions of both Asian and African Americans, and to highlight the benefits Asians have reaped merely by “not being black” (“Racist Love” 75). He calls Chinese Americans “a race of yellow white supremacists,” drawing a distinction between “racist love” directed towards Asian Americans and “racist hate” directed towards African Americans (Kim

178). The stereotype of the “black stud,” he argues, arises out of “racist hate,” and the subservient “Charlie Chan” out of “racist love”—and both forms of racism are despicable.

However, as he continues, he makes it sound as though the oppression faced by black men is somehow preferable. As Kim puts it, the “black stud” is “hated because [he] cannot be controlled by whites,” but “[he] command[s] respect and [is] superior in many ways to [...] the products of racist love” (178). Chin’s critique loses focus of the boundary between trope and reality: “We’re hated by the blacks because the whites love us for being everything the blacks are not,” he says, “Blacks are a problem: bad-ass. Chinese-Americans are not a problem: kiss-ass” (179). He makes no attempt to elucidate how history has played a role in black Americans being seen as “a problem”—and does not acknowledge the negative consequences of this hypervisibility and constant association with criminality. Instead, he states that black people “*are*” “bad-ass,” comparatively “cool” in comparison to Asians, without any mention of how or why this idea has been constructed. Rather than cast into question whether Asians truly are “everything the blacks are not”—and what society claims “blacks are”—at times Chin merely buys into white perspectives on both Asian and African Americans. In his semi-autobiographical short story, “Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy,” he writes:

“Why can't you boys, you Negroes and Mexicans,” the visiting cop said, all creases, jingling metals, and hair on his knuckles [...] “... stay out of trouble like the Chinese? Mind your folks? Study hard? Obey the laws?” And there we Chinamen were, in Lincoln Elementary School, Oakland, California, in a world where manliness counts for everything, surrounded by bad blacks and bad Mexican kids [...I was] suddenly stripped and shaved bare by this cop, exposed for copping another man's flash, imitating this from the blacks, that from the Mexicans, something from whites, with no manly style of my own, unless it was sissiness. (64)

“We have not been black. We have not caused problems. We have not been men,” Chin says, of his fellow Chinese Americans (Kim 179-180). Even as he points out the anti-black racism of the

Asian community, his central perspective seems to be that black men somehow have an advantage over Asian men; however black men suffer, at least they are men and seen as such. Chin's choice to have a cop (rather than a teacher, for example) assert Chinese obeisance and moral character is surely not a coincidence; the overwhelming racial disparity in rates of arrest and incarceration of blacks and Latinos in comparison to whites and Asians could not have been lost on him.

Yet he believes that the black "studs" like those in the classroom with the "Chinatown Cowboy" Ben Fee "cannot be controlled by whites" and "command respect." If above all "manliness counts for everything," Ben stands no chance against "bad blacks and bad Mexican kids." He sits among "kids" like himself, but also describes them as "manly" and says he is "copping another *man's* flash." Conceptions of African American and Latino American boys as "manlier" has had real consequences; research has shown that "black boys [are] viewed as older" and "less innocent than whites" (American Psychological Association). Black children thirteen or even younger may be perceived as adults (McDonough). Twelve year old Tamir Rice was shot and killed holding a toy gun in November 2014 by police who assumed he was around twenty years old (Lopez). Rather than "commanding respect" and being untouchable by white society, black men and even children are overwhelmingly seen as degenerate—and the most extreme measures are taken by the American legal system to control them.

Chin's "Chinatown Cowboy" describes Chinese American men as "chameleons looking for color, trying on tongues and clothes and hairdos, taking everyone else's [sic], with none of our own, and no habitat" (59). "Our manhood just never came home," the narrator mourns (59). Chin laments the dehumanizing blankness of the racially in-between space Asian Americans inhabit, as well as the invisibility it confers upon men like himself. At the same time, he rightfully

highlights the ridiculousness of “trying on tongues and clothes and hairdos” ultimately belonging to others; however, rather than affirming the inherent manhood of Asian American men, Chin acts as if they must become something else in order to become accepted as men. What’s more, he fails to acknowledge how this constant taking-on-and-off of attires and identities may contribute to the dehumanization of other minority groups. He criticizes the tendency to “copycat”—and the drive to assimilate—but his “yellow power” solution is in itself a “copycat” of the Black Power Movement. Writer and activist Kenyon Farrow pointedly questioned an Asian American panel of hip hop artists what it is “about Black people (and especially Black masculinity in the case of hip-hop), and what they represent to others, that is so attractive to other people, including non-white people of color.”

Asian American men are feminized, desexualized, rarely seen in the media as objects of desire or the hero of the story, and this “aping” of other groups is perhaps at least in part a consequence of the continuing dearth of representation today. ABC’s 2015 *Fresh off the Boat*, lauded for its existence as the first primetime show about an Asian American family since Margaret Cho’s *All American Girl* 21 years ago, features a main character obsessed with black hip-hop culture. Real-life Eddie Huang, who wrote the memoir of the same name, protests that the show “denigrates hip-hop culture by portraying it as a vector for adopting sexist attitudes — a perversion of what, for him, had been a vital emotional outlet” (Yang). He maintains that for him, it was a way to survive, as well as to “reject the role of the eager assimilator” and avoid being reduced to a cipher of “model minority” (Yang). Yet embracing blackness in order to resist Asian American assimilation only reproduces the system of beliefs that places “black” and “Asian” on opposite poles—that perpetuates “racist love” towards Asian Americans and “racist hate” towards black Americans.

“Black culture,” explains Wesley Yang in his profile of Huang, “provides the missing half of the fully human entity that the Asian-American who consents to the model-minority myth has to relinquish.” Essentially, Huang’s embrace of “black culture” is a way of giving himself depth, but this very idea of blackness as the “missing half” of the fully-human Asian American presents both black and Asian personhood as less than human. Both Asian Americans and African Americans are dehumanized by insidious stereotyping in different ways, but the Asian man can *resist* his own dehumanization by co-opting blackness, without facing the consequences of actually being black in American society. Furthermore, this can easily cross over into what seems like minstrelsy: the portrait accompanying the article on Huang features him sneering with a grill worn on his teeth and a gold chain on his neck.

“I know that Black creativity has saved your life many times before,” writes Nadijah Robinson, addressing non-black artists:

I know, because I’ve seen it happen. I’ve listened as non-Black people in my communities raised on Hip Hop talked about how it was the only relatable, empowering culture they found that also educated and radicalized them as a youth. [...] I’ve watched as folks become activist celebrities using radical ideas from Black Power and Civil Rights movements to shape programs that do not benefit Black people. I’ve watched as people make livings and loads of social capital off of DJing Black music, dancing, walking and dressing like Black people, selling the Black aesthetic to others. Without Black people, what would your lives be? You might be thinking, you know, it’s so much more complicated than all this, race is complex, we’re all part of the human family [...] Black art is not free for all damaged souls. [...] Your pain and isolation, however real it may be, is not the same as being Black. Your self-adoption into hip hop and djembe drumming and spoken word, makes our art forms all about you. You, however well meaning, have stolen Black labour and invention and used it for your own purpose.

Critical race scholar George Lipsitz has introduced the term “strategic anti-essentialism,” which refers to “the adoption (and adaption) by one cultural group of a cultural form drawn from a different culture, typically in order to resist an imposed cultural identity” (Chandler). He argues in his *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* that “strategic anti-essentialism can enable open expression of suppressed parts of one’s identity. Yet [...] it can do more to harm than to help antiracist efforts” (205). Engaging with black art may be a way for Asian American men to express the masculinity denied to them by essentializing tropes, but can also end up reproducing these essentialisms, as well as a black/Asian power dynamic wherein Asians remain towards the top of the racial hierarchy.

When one “branches out,” however—actively engages with other racial communities, each on their own terms—Lipsitz states, “strategic anti-essentialism can serve broader purposes”: “By proving that identities can be learned and performed, strategic anti-essentialism and branching out can sometimes show that belief and belonging is not always a matter of blood and bone” (*Footsteps* 205; “Mixed Race Identities” 36). Farrow, like Robinson, incisively responds to claims that “nobody has a monopoly on culture.” “Least of all Black people,” he asserts: “As the descendants of slaves, the property of others, nothing belongs to us.” At the end of her essay, Robinson contends that non-black people inspired by black art and ideas should be willing to engage with African American issues and support the community rather than merely profit off of them. Ultimately, such “branching out” seems like a possible solution to these tensions between Asian Americans and African Americans. The question of why Asian Americans are drawn to black activism, literature, and art is an important one. As we see with Frank Chin and again with Eddie Huang, this attraction is based in recognition of a shared struggle to be seen as fully human (and fully “man”). Nonetheless, attempts to reconcile Asian and African American

literature, music, activism, identity, and so forth often remain steeped in essentializing racial tropes—and fail to question why these tropes are so attractive, nor consider the consequences of embracing them.

**“The Uneasy Coalition of Our Colors”:
Racial Tensions in Lee’s *Native Speaker***

Chang-Rae Lee’s debut novel *Native Speaker* (1995), like Chin’s work, explores themes of assimilation as well as racial tensions both between Asian Americans and African Americans and between Asian Americans and white Americans. Considered a staple of contemporary Asian American literature, the text’s protagonist, Henry Park, is a Korean American spy grappling with his identity. As a spy, Henry exemplifies the invisibility and mutability of the Asian in America. Henry is assigned to collect information on up-and-coming potential mayoral candidate John Kwang, who is struggling to find footing with the African American community in a fictionalized aftermath of the Rodney King beating. Henry’s immigrant father, the successful owner of a chain of bodegas in Queens, provides another lens through which to examine black-Asian relations. Meanwhile, Henry’s marriage to a white woman, Lelia, is fraught with its own tensions.

The relationship between African Americans and Korean immigrants is never quite at the forefront of the novel, but always just on the sidelines of *Native Speaker*; it never quite fully commits to explicating just how deep a role they have played in shaping the Korean American consciousness. Only one African American character (also named Henry, surely not coincidentally) is actually given substantial dialogue. Nonetheless, these conflicts and concerns are always simmering somewhere in the background. “What could be so bad that we had to be

that careful of what people thought of us?” Henry remembers asking himself, struck by his mother’s shame and reticence in public:

As if we ought to mince delicately about in pained feet through our immaculate neighborhood [...] as if everything with us were always all right, in our great sham of propriety, as if nothing could touch us or wreak anger or sadness upon us. That we believe in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground. (53)

This litany of “American” values and actions steadily builds from financial success—“making money,” “perfect credit”—to profound violence—“shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground” (53). There is, of course, a connection between all of these things: the “pressed pants,” polished apples, and violent conflict between Asian and African Americans are all tied up into the system of capitalism and the desperation for survival and success. The fact that each of these actions and items is a way of not only “believing in” but “impressing” Americans—white Americans—suggests how these markers of “propriety” have been created via white supremacy. In calling assimilation a “great sham,” Henry exposes the myth of the model minority, but also highlights what lengths Asian Americans will go in order to uphold it.

Silence is core to Henry’s identity as a Korean American, but at the same time, he sees it as depriving him of identity altogether. “The problem,” he says, “is that while you have been raised to speak quietly and little, the notions of where you come from and who you are need a maximal approach” (182). Reminiscent of Chin’s Ben and his jealousy towards “bad” black and Mexican boys, as a teenager Henry sees the “black kids who hung out in front of [his] father’s stores” as more secure in themselves than he could ever be: “confident,” unassailable, not as

concerned with the gaze of the white viewer. Asian silence and invisibility is again contrasted with black loudness, hypervisibility, and masculinity as he describes how “envious” he was of how they would “so jubilantly celebrate the fact [of their identity] with their hands and hips and tongues, letting it all hang out [...] for anybody who’d look and listen” (182). These “black kids,” he believes, may “let it all hang out,” unapologetically, without hiding any piece of themselves. Henry, on the other hand, must “stay silent in [his] guises,” never expressing the truth of who he is—or, indeed, having the opportunity to discover who he really is—and instead projecting whichever image is most appropriate (193).

There is a strange and troubling contradiction in his admiration of the black boys outside his father’s stores and the hatred of black people perpetuated by his parents. Henry believes that black youth are more allowed to be themselves, so to speak, than he ever will be, but points out as well how the “black face” becomes dehumanized and associated inalienably with crime. “In the end, after all those years, he felt nothing for them,” Henry states of his father, “Not even pity. To him a black face meant inconvenience, or trouble, or the threat of death” (186). Recalling watching his father argue with a black woman who was a regular customer, he describes their day-in-and-day-out verbal sparring as “circular and vicious,” like the fights of “lovers, scarred, knowing” (186). “It’s like they are here to torture each other,” he continues, even-handedly: “He can’t afford a store anywhere else but where she lives, and she has no other place to buy a good apple or a fresh loaf of bread” (186). Lee here presents Korean/black conflict sympathetically as an endless cycle neither can escape, and the ensuing struggles as perhaps equivalent—yet also states that assimilation into American identity is essentially contingent on “shooting black people.”

According to Caroline Rody, “in contrast to the anguished searches in Frank Chin’s

writing for white and especially black father figures,” Lee’s Henry finds a beacon of true Asian American masculinity in John Kwang, the politician (75). Kwang is adored by the nonwhite immigrant community, but ignored by whites and mistrusted by African Americans (Lee 143). Nonetheless, he continues to seek ways to promote interethnic solidarity, giving speeches urging the public to see beyond constructed boundaries of race and find the humanity in one another, mediating black-Korean disputes, and so forth. Though Kwang exemplifies the immigrant success story often founded on strategic separation from other nonwhite minorities, his political vision is one of inclusion rather than exclusion. “I remember walking these very streets as a young man, watching the crowds and demonstrations,” he tells Henry, “I felt welcomed by the parades of young black men and women”:

A man pulled me right out from the sidewalk and said I should join them. I did. I went along. I tried to feel what they were feeling. How could I know? I had visited Louisiana and Texas and I sat where I wished on buses, I drank from whatever fountain was nearest. No one ever said anything. One day I was coming out of a public bathroom in Fort Worth and a pretty white woman stopped me and pointed and said that the Colored in the sign meant black and Mexican. She smiled very kindly and told me I was very light-skinned. [...] What did I know? I didn’t speak English very well, and like anyone who doesn’t I mostly listened. But back here, the black power on the streets! Their songs and chants! I thought *this* is America! They were so young and awesome, so truly powerful, if only in themselves, no matter what anybody said. (195)

Kwang seems to be the epitome of what Lipsitz refers to as “branching out.” “Black power on the streets” was his political awakening, but rather than simply co-opt this movement, he acknowledges his distance from it: “How could he know” what “they were feeling?” Though “no one ever said anything” to him regardless of which side of the color line he chose to ally himself with, and thus he could easily have chosen assimilation towards “whiteness,” he does not “abandon communities of black and brown people” (Matsuda 150). Henry is taken with Kwang’s

idealism, and struck deeply by the way he “think[s] of America as a part of him, maybe even his,” seeing this as the “crucial leap of [Kwang’s] identity,” and one which seems to be enabled by his interethnic vision (211). Nonetheless, Kwang never succeeds in forming a coalition with black political leaders, nor in winning over the black voters necessary to secure his political career. Ultimately, he meets his downfall at the end of the novel, after the campaign contributions he has received from illegal immigrants are exposed.

On the other hand, *Native Speaker* also addresses tensions between white and Asian Americans. The novel begins with Lelia leaving Henry and handing him a rather demeaning “list of who [he is],” one which he takes as “truth,” perhaps alluding to how white discourse around racial minorities becomes codified and even accepted by the minorities themselves (1). The dissolution of their relationship is in part caused by the accidental death by suffocation of their seven-year-old mixed-race son, Mitt. “You pale little boys are crushing him, your adoring mob of hands and feet,” says Henry of the neighborhood white children forming a “dog pile” on top of his son (107). “So beautifully jumbled and subversive and historic,” Mitt could not survive in today’s society, suggests Lelia: “Maybe it’s that Mitt wasn’t all white or all yellow [...] Maybe the world wasn’t ready for him” (103). Lelia and Henry’s separation, as well as Mitt’s death, suggest that white-Asian alliance and intermixing is not truly possible or sustainable.

However, the novel ultimately resolves those problems; by its conclusion, the two are back together, with Henry serving as Lelia’s assistant in teaching English as a Foreign Language to immigrant children. Lelia takes roll call, calling out each name “as best she can,” “speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are” (349). Ostensibly, she is no longer imposing an identity on Henry, no longer telling him “who he is” but “calling the name” of “who he is” and accepting his true self (349). “Soon there will be more

brown and yellow than black and white,” says Kwang, and he and Henry agree that “black and white” has become “an old syntax” (196). Lelia’s transformation indicates that whiteness need not always “crush” difference, that someday in the future the child of a union like her and Henry’s might be able to survive. Nonetheless, the novel’s conclusion affirms only the coalition of white and Asian America. Despite advocating for a terminology that goes beyond the existing binary, the novel’s near-omission of “blackness” ironically reinstates how central this category remains to the construction of “Asian-ness.” Furthermore, the descriptions of Mitt as “beautifully jumbled and subversive and historic”—“no one,” Henry thinks, “had ever looked like that”—veer in the direction of mixed-race idealization and fetishism.

“Post-Racial” Future in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*

Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* likewise idealizes a future majority mixed-race (and thus post-racial) America. The novel features a half-white, half-Japanese protagonist, Jane Takagi-Little, hired to direct a reality television program, *My American Wife!*, aimed at increasing sales of red meat in Japan. Jane, having lived in both America and Japan, “polysexual, polyracial, perverse,” “racially half—neither here nor there,” sees herself as “uniquely suited to the niche [she is] to occupy in the television industry” (9). Each episode of *My American Wife!* is to introduce a different beef-centric recipe cooked by the wife of an “all-American” family (which, according to producer Ueno, means a white, middle-class woman with two or three children). “Although my heart was set on being a documentarian,” Jane states, “it seems I was more useful as a go-between, a cultural pimp, selling off the vast illusion of America to a cramped population on that small string of Pacific islands” (9). By virtue of being biracial, she is perceived as a unique intermediary between America and Japan, capable of harking American values to an

overseas audience effectively. However, rather than sell this “illusion” of white, wealthy America, Jane ultimately takes the opportunity instead to showcase America’s diversity:

I had spent so many years, in both Japan and America, floundering in a miasma of misinformation about culture and race. I was determined to use this window into mainstream network television to educate. Perhaps I was naïve, but I believed, honestly, that I could use wives to sell meat in the service of a Larger Truth. (27)

Youngsuk Chae argues that *My Year of Meats* “investigates how the media has contributed to fortifying the white-centered image of America” and “seeks to shift the focus from the white speculative gaze towards the racially, culturally, and sexually marginalized and underrepresented groups in the United States” (107). Ozeki, she says, “uses Jane to uncover the U.S. contradictory reality in which diversity is rhetorically advertised, yet racial/ethnic minorities are ideologically underrepresented” (115). In this respect, I find myself disagreeing with Chae. *My Year of Meats* may not be altogether “politically acquiescent,” but its political consciousness does not go far beyond the glib embrace of multiculturalism that Chae herself criticizes.

As discussed in chapter two, surface-level diversity and representation does little to ensure social or political change. Jane does resist the idealization of heterosexual whiteness by featuring wives of various races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and family situations. She takes as her subjects a white Southern woman who has adopted ten Korean children, and whose chef husband does the cooking; a biracial lesbian couple (one black, one white) who are vegetarians, as are their children; an African American family; a family of Mexican immigrants. Yet despite the novel’s portrayal of American multiculturalism, which works to evidence that there is no one way to be an “American wife,” each of these representations, although positive, is fairly two-dimensional.

Jane also romanticizes the notion of a post-racial America, wherein such differences of

race and culture will no longer truly exist. In the service of a “Larger Truth,” she diversifies the show far beyond the limitations the BEEF-EX corporation has handed down, but simultaneously puts future homogeneity on a pedestal:

All over the world, native species are migrating, if not disappearing, and in the next millennium the idea of an indigenous person or plant or culture will just seem quaint [...] Being half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we’re all going to be brown, sort of. Some days, when I’m feeling grand, I feel brand-new—like a prototype. Back in the olden days, my dad’s ancestors got stuck behind the Alps and my mom’s on the east side of the Urals. Now, oddly, I straddle this blessed, ever-shrinking world. (15)

“Being half,” she says, “I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we’re all going to be brown, sort of.” Why is this vision so attractive to the Asian American writer? What is the benefit of having difference flattened out, of the world “shrinking?” How has it become so easy to believe that an increased population of mixed-race people will bring about an era of social harmony? Jane describes herself as “brand-new,” a “prototype”; Henry and Lelia’s Mitt is “subversive,” “historic.” The emphasis on the “newness” of this union is strange, considering the long history of interracial relationships in the U.S.; both imagine a post-racial, mostly “brown” future, but the racial hybridity that actually exists within their texts is primarily white and Asian.

Jane embarks on her own “breeding project,” inspired by her dreams as a teenager to eventually “make a baby who could one day be King of the World. An embodied United Nations” (149). She recounts going to the library and reading a 1902 text that split the world into five different races, detailing their physical features and temperaments. The “black” race is described as “very ignorant,” “savages”; the “yellow” as “wise enough to adopt many of the customs of the white race,” with the Japanese singled out in particular (149, 150). “I knew there was something very wrong with this picture of the world,” Jane says; she had been “searching for amalgamation,

not divisiveness” (150). Though her desire for unification and commonality indicates a rebellion against rigid notions of race and inherent racial characteristics, even this search for “amalgamation” cannot “escape the hierarchical racist pseudoscience by which [it] is informed” (Greenberg 69). Jane “learn[s] what [she] need[s]: a mate who was black, brown, or red, to go with [her] white and yellow” (151). “At the very least,” she “aim[s] for three out of five,” her drive to unify only within the bounds of these five categories, and continuing to assert race as a biological category (151). Additionally, despite overturning ideas about the superiority of racial purity, Jane’s determination to produce the “King of the World” reinforces other pseudoscientific notions about the genetic advantages of race mixing (though its humorous capitalization, as with the “Larger Truth” she wants *My American Wife!* to express, clearly undercuts its seriousness).

At twenty-one, Jane’s forgotten “breeding project” once again rears its head, “triggered” by Emil, an African student she meets as a graduate student in Japan. Their resulting relationship further demonstrates how her interethnic desire—and the idealization of mixed progeny—is oft-predicated on racist tropes. She is immediately drawn to Emil as he is “tall” and “coal black,” “utterly different” in a sea of supposedly homogeneous Japanese bodies (151). When Jane recounts their first encounter, he is described in animalistic terms as a predator and her his prey, recalling the “savage” nature attributed to blackness in her library book: their “eyes [meet] over the tops of the schoolgirls’ heads and he [freezes] like a panther, hungry after a long nap, at the sight of an antelope jogging by” (151). He “sprints” after her going on a jog; when they speak, “his voice” is compared to “chocolate” (152).

Eventually, Jane shares her hope to conduct an “experiment in biotech” with Emil. “You spotted a handsome black man and recognized my genetic potential,” he responds: “Some people might call that racism, you know” (152). Jane’s “breeding project” and “experiment in biotech”

are perhaps an attempt to satirize recent discourse on the genetic benefits of interracial unions. Nevertheless, Emil's accusation of racism is immediately undercut by Jane's protestation that Emil was the one who chased her, and by his "consenting" to be "the genetic engineer of [their] love" (152). "Again and again," remembers Jane, "I made Emil comply," "monitored my temperature, timed my cycles, and tested my secretions" (153). The entire process of her ongoing struggle to conceive is described as though it were a detached scientific undertaking, with Emil more of an object—or subject—than anything else. Despite all her efforts, her dream never comes to fruition: "I had thought of myself as mulatto (half horse, half donkey—i.e., a "young mule"), but my mulishness went further than just stubbornness or racial metaphor," explains Jane, "Like many hybrids, it seemed, I was destined to be nonreproductive" (152). In the end, however, it is revealed that her "nonreproductive" nature is a result not of her "hybridity" but of American capitalism; *My Year of Meats*, after all, is not merely a reflection on multicultural America but a scathing indictment of antibiotic use in the meat industry. Nonetheless, whereas her relationship with Emil falls apart over time as a result of her inability to get pregnant, her relationship with a white man, Sloan, culminates in a miraculous and unexpected pregnancy. Despite a devastating miscarriage, the novel ends with her still happily involved with Sloan.

The other piece of the novel's happy conclusion involves Akiko, the wife of the racist and misogynist producer, Ueno. Ueno forces Akiko, who is similarly "nonreproductive" because of an eating disorder, to watch the *My American Wife!* program, both to encourage her to eat meat and thus become able to produce a son, as well as to give feedback on each episode. Akiko, a stereotypically petite and submissive Japanese wife, is profoundly moved by the more "subversive" episodes. Seeing the stories of Dyann and Lara, the biracial lesbian couple, as well as Grace and Vern's Louisiana family of adopted Korean children, among others, enables her to

recognize the physical and sexual abuse she is facing at the hands of her husband and to realize that she may in fact be attracted to women. Each of the wives' stories, though resisting the image of America as defined only by the dominant white upper-class, adds only to another persistent stereotype of America as being wholly accepting and welcoming of difference—in stark comparison to Asian conservatism and sexist attitudes.

The fact that the television program is well-received by not just Akiko but the Japanese public despite the producers' shock and disapproval questions Japan's supposed "homogeneity," traditionalism, and preference for whiteness. Likewise, when Jane recounts the real-life 1992 death of sixteen-year-old Japanese exchange student Yoshihiro Hattori, who accidentally rang the wrong doorbell on his way to a Halloween party and was shot by the father of the white Southern family inside, she reveals the contradiction in celebrating American diversity even as racial and ethnic minorities continue to be targets of violence and discrimination. Even so, at the novel's conclusion, Akiko must come to America, carrying her rapist husband's baby, in order to accept herself and find self-actualization. *My Year of Meats*' final chapters are strangely self-congratulatory in describing Akiko's "stunned" reaction to the "generosity," "amplitude of feeling" and "openness" of the American people she encounters (337).

Riding an Amtrak train from Louisiana to New York, passing "rusty cars" and "mangy dogs," Akiko realizes with shock that "the people who lived here were poor" (336). Maurice, the Amtrak coach attendant, a "kind [...] wiry black man," explains that the train she happens to be riding is the "Chicken Bone Special": "It's called the Chicken Bone, Miss A-KEE-kow," he explains, "because all these poor black folks here, they too poor to pay out good money for them frozen cardboard sandwiches that Amtrak serves up in what they call the *Lounge Car*, so these poor colored folk, they gotta make do with lugging along some home-cooked fried chicken

instead” (338). Maurice’s explanation is met with cheers from the passengers and a rousing chorus of “chicken bone chicken bone chicken bone”; suddenly, Akiko is “surrounded by people offering her drumsticks and paper plates of potato salad” (339):

Akiko clapped her hands in time and looked around her at the long coach filled with singing people. This would never happen on the train in Hokkaido! [...] She’d felt [...] as if somehow she’d been absorbed into a massive body that had taken over the functions of her own, and now it was infusing her small heart with the superabundance of its feeling teaching her taut belly to swell, stretching her rib cage, and pumping spurts of happy life into her fetus. [...] *This is America!* she thought. She clapped her hands and then hugged herself with delight. (339)

According to Susan Merrill Squier’s *Poultry Science, Chicken Culture: A Partial Alphabet*, the Chicken Bone Special is a phenomenon dating back to “times of African American migration out of the South to the North and West” when travelers were “forbidden by Jim Crow law” as well as “penury” from entering the lounge car (149). The origins of the Chicken Bone Special lie in black oppression, and Akiko experiences a sudden recognition of American poverty and inequality: America is not the wealthy wonderland she had imagined. However, this is tempered by the fact that “the Chicken Bone Special becomes a mobile stage in the tradition of minstrel shows, exaggerating the multicultural themes of the novel in a form of grotesque parody” (Russell 142). Ozeki problematically transforms this scene into a moment of “delightful” interethnic connection—one which glibly flattens out history and racial difference—by harnessing minstrelsy and stereotype as a device. Moreover, Akiko decides that “this” moment of joy “*is America,*” is representative of everything that defines America (and everything Japan is not). By the end of the passage, all the realities of poverty and marginalization are forgotten; America has somehow once again become a multicultural paradise.

Earlier in the novel, Jane attempts to convince Akiko’s husband, Joichi Ueno, to let her

film an episode on Helen Dawes, a black housewife. Ueno breaks down into tears at the church service the Dawes family invites them to, the experience “break[ing] the bonds of his repression and liberat[ing] his wellspring of love,” yet he still refuses to allow Jane to film the episode (114). Akiko, rather, feels “as if somehow she’d been absorbed into a massive body that had taken over the functions of her own.” She is fully integrated and subsumed seamlessly into the greater collective of the working-class black passengers, unlike her husband, whose catharsis is transitory and ultimately insincere. Even so, the novel’s inclusion of black and African American characters is stereotypically spiritualized (and in the case of Emil, African but not American, animalized and objectified). The experiences of black collectivity within *My Year of Meats* exist primarily to bring others solace and rediscovery, to give them a sense of sustenance and wholeness: Akiko is filled with this “superabundance” of feeling literally “pumping happy spurts of life into her fetus.” This scene is so fantastical that it strains belief as anything other than parody, yet its placement as the key cathartic moment in Akiko’s storyline suggests its sincerity.

David Palumbo-Liu argues in favor of Ozeki’s “sentimental multiculturalist project” (Greenberg 87). “The novel can indeed be read as a failure to deliver on its promises,” he says, “as all sorts of national, gendered, and racial norms seem to be reinstated” (Palumbo-Liu 54). Nevertheless, he posits that *My Year of Meats* is “more complex, self-conscious, and interestingly crafted than it might appear,” and “suggests that it is the sentimental—the affective nature of literature—that also provides the seeds of ethical and social change” (Palumbo-Liu 54, Greenberg 87). In editing and putting together the *My American Wife!* episodes as well as her meat-industry documentary, “Jane not only recognizes the necessity to ‘manipulate’ sentiment, she also recognizes precisely the need to be fictive” (56). “Maybe sometimes you have to make things up to tell truths that alter outcomes,” says Jane, to “do [your] best to imagine” a happy

ending in order to bring one into reality (Ozeki 360). “We ignore the sentimental at our own risk,” Palumbo-Liu declares, “rather than simple knowledge or ‘rationality’ it might be the most powerful tool in persuasive storytelling, and progressives should reclaim that as a tool” (66).

This imagining of a better future recalls Sharma and Lee writing their own new endings as a way of dealing with painful realities. But what “outcome” does the novel seek in its sentimental happy endings for Jane and Akiko? What does *My Year of Meats* in the end wish to “persuade” us about multiculturalism and America’s future? Akiko’s absorption into the singular “massive body” of togetherness with the poor black community supports a vision of not an interracial, but rather a saccharine *post*-racial, solidarity. Despite the racially specific origins of the Chicken Bone Special, her body and identity in this moment are indistinguishable from the African American passengers around her—and “this” smooth, perfect unification apparently “*is*” America. Jane “realizes” that “truth [is] like race and could be measured only in ever-diminishing approximations,” but fails to expose race as a construction while also maintaining an acknowledgement of different identities, lived experiences, and institutionalized forms of racism (176). Despite on the surface celebrating difference, *My Year of Meats* ultimately envisions and idealizes a future multicultural solidarity that is ironically emptied entirely of racial and cultural distinction.

Conclusion

Last August, I began following the shooting of black teenager Michael Brown by white police officer Darren Wilson and resulting protests in Ferguson, Missouri, as I continued with my reading for what would soon become this project. I found myself troubled by many Asian American responses to the situation in Ferguson. Many failed to respond at all. The 2014 Asian

American Journalists Association, held in the aftermath of the shooting of Mike Brown, was described as “business as usual” (Prince). Others leapt to defend Wilson. A South Asian policeman, Sunil Dutta, contributed an essay titled “I’m a cop. If you don’t want to get hurt, don’t challenge me” to the *Huffington Post*: “if you don’t want to get shot, tased, pepper-sprayed, struck with a baton or thrown to the ground,” he says, “just do what I tell you. Don’t argue with me, don’t call me names, don’t tell me that I can’t stop you, don’t say I’m a racist pig.”

Arthur Chu, meanwhile, published an essay in August called “Men Without a Country: Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, My Father and Me” on *The Daily Beast*, in an attempt to explain why, as an Asian American, he was so affected by these deaths that “ostensibly, had “nothing to do with [him].” “In Trayvon Martin’s world, in my father’s world, in the world that under all the assimilation and the ‘model minority’ bullshit I live in,” he says, there is no such thing as justice, no way to be heard or to belong. “I can pretend to belong here better than Trayvon was ever given the chance to,” he writes: “I fear being snubbed and sometimes spat on but rarely shot. And that is a very important difference. But it is still not my country.”

In many ways, I appreciated his sentiments. White America, he argues, is not looking out for Asian Americans any more than they are looking out for black Americans. Thus, he asserts, Asian Americans should care about police brutality, too, rather than blame the victims and reiterate the same excuses about why this violence occurs. His essay was largely lauded by Asian American media outlets as a poignant and deeply felt testament to the shared non-belonging of both groups. Yet even his piece felt somehow inadequate in his insistence that Asian American and African American “homelessness” in the United States—that “Trayvon Martin’s world” and the world he lives in—are essentially one and the same (Chu).

Chin’s work aims to shed new light on the plight of the Asian American male, but his

woes surrounding his emasculation fall back on stereotypes of blackness associated with masculine “coolness” while ignoring realities of oppression. Lee, I feel, draws false equivalencies across black and immigrant Korean struggle in *Native Speaker*, and presents black activists and politicians as constituting a barrier keeping Asian Americans from positions of political import. He and Ozeki both put forward hope for a post-race future America—one that is thus emptied of the idealized diversity and acceptance that would create it. In these works, blackness is harnessed as a symbol or as a plot device, with little actual black representation included, even as attempts are made to go “beyond” black and white (whether to focus on what it is to be Asian, or to envision a race-less America). Jared Sexton quotes Mari J. Matsuda:

When we say we need to move beyond Black and white, this is what a whole lot of people say or feel or think: ‘Thank goodness we can get off that paradigm, because those Black people made me feel so uncomfortable. I know all about Blacks, but I really don’t know anything about Asians, and while we’re deconstructing that Black-white paradigm, we also need to reconsider the category of race altogether, since race, as you know, is a constructed category, and thank god I don’t have to take those angry black people seriously anymore. (Sexton 90)

I cannot help but question why so many efforts to work towards Asian American and African American solidarity in literature are so contingent on erasing the specificity of black history and experience. Soya Jung of *Race Files* states in her “Why Ferguson Matters to Asian Americans” that “given that the U.S. economy and political system are rooted in anti-blackness, claiming our place in America means that we must take a position” when faced with the separate but unequal worlds of whiteness and blackness.” “We are either left or right of the color line,” she asserts: “There is no sitting that out.” Our society is far from post-racial, far from “beyond” black and white. I find it difficult to believe that it ever truly will be, nor that this is what we

should aspire to. All in all, I do not believe we need to eradicate our differences in order to truly find solidarity.

Conclusion

White supremacy is the great silence of our world, and in it is embedded much of what ails us as a planet. The silence around white supremacy is like the silence around Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* or the Voldemort name, which must never be uttered in the Harry Potter novels. And yet here's the rub: If a critique of white supremacy doesn't first flow through you, doesn't first implicate you, then you have missed the mark; you have, in fact, almost guaranteed its survival and reproduction. There's that old saying: The devil's greatest trick is that he convinced people that he doesn't exist. Well, white supremacy's greatest trick is that it has convinced people that, if it exists at all, it exists always in other people, never in us.

—Junot Díaz

“The Great Silence of Our World”

Throughout my experience writing this project, I contended with the same difficult questions again and again. Can a continent of origin truly serve to unite vastly different texts and perspectives? How can we discuss Asian American literature without assuming some inherent commonality across all texts authored by Asian Americans, and without reinforcing the idea that “white literature” is the default? I have struggled perhaps most of all with the notion of “difference” and its implications. Jameson asserts the importance of acknowledging the “radical difference” of the third-world text, but such all-encompassing declarations of disparity can often have the perhaps unintended effect of essentialization and homogenization. White people assured of these profound dissimilarities may have their stereotypes comfortably affirmed, know that Asian Americans really *are* strange and inscrutable, and confirm for themselves that they were right to think such people were so alien to their own experience.

It troubles me, too, that these assertions of difference are so one-sided. White (especially the Anglo Saxon variation) is, for so many people in this country and on this planet, a form of difference in its own right. And yet every person of color in America is asked constantly to empathize with white people in books and movies and in real life, to put ourselves in their shoes, to assimilate. From birth we are inundated with images of white people. We must relate; there is no other choice.

This, in and of itself, evidences that difference does not undercut our potential for empathy, that it can stand side by side with commonality. There is universality in what it is to be human, but not all experiences are shared. The Asian American writers I have analyzed in my project for the most part seek to create characters that are fully-fledged rather than stereotype, who are individuals as they remain anchored to a greater community. They refuse to divest

themselves of their “difference”—and meanwhile refuse to frame those differences in a way that makes them palatable and consumable for the white reader. Moreover, the Asian American literary “community” as it were has with time become increasingly inclusive. Once restricted by the masculine, non-Christian, and non-immigrant (as well as solely Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino) guidelines set by Chin and co., today Asian American literature encompasses writers originating from nearly any part of the continent, numerous recent immigrants, and countless female voices. Organizations like the Asian American Writers Workshop work to foster pan-ethnic Asian unity and interchange through the creating and sharing of literature.

What frustrates me more than anything else, in light of all this, is seeing these same old generalizations about difference reproduced in Asian American texts, in their representations of black Americans. Blackness is either irreconcilable with Asian-ness, commodified and appropriated in order to make one more interesting, or is made equivalent to Asian-ness under an inadequate universalist logic, with white America the enemy and all the nuances of relations between people of color erased. Perhaps as Díaz puts it, white supremacy is the greatest silence of all, and its “greatest trick” seeming to always be outside of us. It exists even in “us”—even in Asian American literature that itself comes from a place of historical oppression under white society.

As I write this, riots are occurring in response to the brutal death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and the mass media has unsurprisingly sided once again with law enforcement. Black violence against property is condemned as police violence against black civilians is excused. My project as a whole has sought to uplift the voices of Asian American writers, to affirm that their stories are worth being told and being heard. Nonetheless, I feel that there must be a way to support Asian Americans without glossing over the unique struggles of African Americans, and

to acknowledge the constructed nature of race while maintaining its structural and social reality.

The work of Mori, Sharma, Ozeki, and Lee—among other Asian American authors not cited here—has inspired and challenged me in so many ways over the past year. I see what Asian American literature can do, and how the act of writing has been harnessed so powerfully as a resistance against our own oversimplification and dehumanization. I know we can do even better. I believe we will, and perhaps already are: There is still so much more out there for me to discover.

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