The Children of 1965
On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American

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Duke University Press • Durham & London 2013
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Chapter 1
Theorizing Expectations

Everyone is invested with expectations of various kinds, to one degree or another, and some of these undoubtedly bear striking similarities to the ones that most frequently adhere to discourses about Asian Americans. Still, specific expectations pose challenges for Asian Americans that others, who are differently raced, do not face. The young in particular have often been reminded of how young they are and of what awaits them once they reach maturity. Harold Bloom, one of the most venerable American literary scholars of the postwar era, provides a vivid illustration of this point when he observes:

One of my growing convictions, founded upon the last 20 years or so of my more than 40 years of teaching at Yale University, is that the life of the mind and the spirit in the United States will be dominated by Asian Americans in the opening decades of the 21st century. The intellectuals . . . are emerging from the various Asian-American peoples. In this displacement, the roles once played in American culture and society by the children of Jewish immigrants to the United States are passing to the children of Asian immigrants, and a new phase of American literature will be one of the consequences.¹

While it is now a commonplace to compare Jewish Americans of an earlier era with contemporary Asian Americans, as in this passage, the former were not compared to another group when they were first leaving their mark on American society. This means that the former were not confronted with the same demographic expectations that now confront the
Chapter 2

The Trope of the Lost Manuscript

Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Fifth Book of Peace* begins in mourning: for a father who recently passed away, a house destroyed by a fire that swept through the Oakland Hills in 1991, and a lost manuscript that was supposed to be the sequel to an earlier novel. Any one of these tragedies alone would have been difficult to endure. Together, they comprise a loss that is greater than the sum of its parts. The absence of the father dislodges a connection to the past that has helped Kingston to understand her place in the present. The house figures the loss of a home, a disconnection from a hard-fought sense of belonging to a place that for Kingston, whose famous literary works often delve into the feeling of belonging nowhere that surrounds an Asian American childhood, is especially poignant. More poignant still, the book manuscript (a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*), which Kingston focuses on as she picks her way through the debris left in the fire’s wake, draws together the sense of having lost a connection to the past and to a place. Its invocation at one point sets off a chain of associations that attaches its loss to the loss of other things contained by her home and, among them, the things that once belonged intimately to her father. This reaffirms how the loss of the manuscript powerfully accentuates a greater absence: “If I had only driven faster, I might have saved the book, and my mother’s jewelry, and my father’s watch, and his spectacles, which fit my eyes, and his draft card, which I had taken from his wallet. ‘This card is to be carried on your person at all times.’ He had carried it safely for over fifty years.”

Despite the thoroughness with which these relations are explored in the opening section of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, one factor remains under-
Chapter 3
Not Ethnic Literature

Caroline Rody has argued that Asian American fiction is noteworthy among its contemporary American cohort because it so often focuses on the puncturing of ethnic boundaries. As a result, it also gravitates toward imaginings that stress “encounter” and “produce shifting and surprising new compositions of the ‘we.’” ¹ Rody is careful to claim that this does not mean that writers, or readers, are compelled to choose between the “conception” of ethnicity “that traces one historical tradition, and that has been a crucial, powerful generator of stories to live by, as well as an essential, strategic marker for marginalized peoples” and an emphasis on what she calls interethnicity, which “attends to the dialogism that postcolonial theorists variously attribute to hybridization, sites of cultural encounter, the contact zone where cultures meet.” ² Still, it’s clear that what attracts her critical attention is the strong tendency in the Asian American fiction she focuses on to do the latter much more than the former. What attracts her attention to Asian American fiction, in other words, is its fondness for dissolving differences of various kind.

There is surely an irony, if not a contradiction, in this observation. While readers of this fiction may recognize the point Rody makes, they might also be struck by how odd it is that Asian Americans are so willing to share or even sacrifice the limelight in the works that they are producing so as to foreground other people’s experiences, and especially the experiences of white people. Without being told, they seem to understand a logic that has long guided U.S. media representations of Asians and Asian Americans alike: narratives about Asian and Asian American characters
Chapter 4

American Personhood

Many literary works by Asian Americans signal in their titles a preoccupation with what it means to be an American, from Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Daniel Okimoto's *American in Disguise* to Gish Jen's *Typical American*, Shawn Wong's *American Knees*, Anurag Mathur’s *The Inscrutable Americans*, Brian Ascalon Roley's *American Son*, Susan Choi's *American Woman*, and Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese*. The common theme that runs through these titles suggests how much the nation remains a force in the struggles each novel narrates. The individual and the nation are intimately related to each other in these works, and in the urge to tell stories that drives their authors. Despite this common theme, however, the longing for a sense of self that is somehow connected to America is expressed in these novels in contradictory ways. There is a longing for an ideal of individuality that the nation is supposed to guarantee. There is also a longing to defy the nation, to occupy the position it has relegated to its margins. And, finally, there is a kind of longing that seems to cohere to a sense of self that exists beyond the nation altogether but does so in a way that does not simply eschew the social.

Susan Choi in particular speaks eloquently about the contradictions between the first two forms of longing when describing her experiences in college as a biracial woman:

My father raised me, I have to say, deliberately as someone who didn’t have much of a sense of ethnic identity. . . . He was after some sort of Platonic ideal of the totally neutral American child. And that just doesn’t exist. And it was frustrating for me. And it was frustrating for
Chapter 5

Comics and the Changing Meaning of Race

Are Asian Americans a racial minority? This question cannot be easily answered one way or another, for Asian Americans are, as Colleen Lye puts it, a “minority which is not one.”¹ Seen from one perspective, Asian Americans are a minority, in that race is an inescapable part of their lives and constraint a reality that is not easily transcended. There is no mistaking that such lives are shadowed by associations with what is foreign and distant, nor that such associations contribute to the shaping of career choices, job advancement, residential preferences, social cohorts, choice of romantic and sexual partners, rates of mental illness, access to health care (including mental health care), political influence, civic engagement, media representations, and a host of other factors that affect the kind of lives Asian Americans lead, as well as the kind of lives they imagine they can lead. Many Asian Americans are among the most impoverished people in the country, live in crowded substandard housing, work incredibly long hours under poor conditions, are cowed by police and governmental bureaucracies, barely get by in service-related jobs or through their involvement in grey areas of the economy, and find their U.S. residency status threatened by whims of the law.

The last item in this litany was painfully experienced firsthand by many Cambodian American young men, who had chosen for whatever reason not to become naturalized citizens, when circumstances changed abruptly after 9/11 so as to make them eligible for deportation for crimes they may have committed years before and for which they had often already served prison sentences.² Similarly, for many South Asian Americans and people of Middle Eastern ancestry, the time after 9/11 has been defined by mass
Chapter 6
Allegory and the Child in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction

The last three stories of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* constitute a formally inventive and ambitious single narrative that follows the intertwined lives of Hema and Kaushik. The first story, “Once in a Lifetime,” is told in the first person, with Hema directly addressing Kaushik as “you” in the text. Hema, who is in middle school and working on a report about ancient Rome, develops a romantic crush on the moody and standoffish sixteen-year-old boy Kaushik, whose family stays with hers while they look for a more permanent place to live. Kaushik and his parents had moved away a few years earlier, from Greater Boston to Bombay, “abandoning a struggle that [Hema’s] parents and their friends had embarked upon,” and have now returned, apparently to resume that struggle once again.¹ The second story, “Year’s End,” is told from Kaushik’s perspective, but while it maintains the literary conceit of having the narrator address the other person in the narrative as “you,” Kaushik only rarely addresses Hema. Instead, he focuses on what has happened to him since he moved out of Hema’s family home: the drawn-out death of his mother from cancer, his departure to college, and his inability to accept the fact that his father has remarried.

Together, “Once in a Lifetime” and “Year’s End” create an expectation that the final installment of this short-story cycle will narrate how Hema and Kaushik run into each other, fulfilling a romantic promise that the first sentence of the first story hints at: “I have seen you before, too many times to count, but a farewell that my family threw for yours, at our house in Inman Square, is when I begin to recall your presence in my life.”² The two seem to be bound to each other, destined by familiarity, similar family
Chapter 7

Becoming Planetary

The huge investments in travel and communication technologies that have marked the start of the twenty-first century have also made people more acutely aware of what Rajini Srikanth describes as “the past memory and future promise of connections with other lands.”¹ That is, even for those who do not travel, distances have shrunk, and the world has become as a result more intimate. This compression of the world along vectors of time and space has put an enormous pressure on contemporary writers, so that the narratives found in their works ubiquitously jump from location to location, ceaselessly occupy one perspective and then another, switching from the first-person singular to a free indirect style that bounds from character to character without respect for nationality or language, and jumble past events with present occurrences. Unusual among writers who are interested in capturing a simultaneity of social experience made possible by time-space compression are narratives resolutely staying within a given moment that follow the actions of a character in a chronologically transparent succession of events uninterrupted by shifts in perspective, breaks in the text, flashbacks, and analepses.

As Rachel Adams has pointed out, “If postmodernism is governed by a sense of paranoia, which suggests that these connections may be figments of an individual imagination, the literature of globalization represents them as a shared perception of community whereby, for better or worse, populations in other parts of the world are inevitably affected by events in another.”² Calling this an “American literary globalism,” one which supersedes the prior dominant literary aesthetic loosely known as postmodernism, Adams enumerates who she thinks are its outstanding contribu-
Chapter 8
Desert–Orient–Nomad

The following appeared in a *New York Times* article concerning a one-year ban on the opening of new fast-food restaurants in South Los Angeles: “The idea is to bring new eating options to the city’s food deserts, the term now in vogue to describe poor neighborhoods whose residents have few places to buy fresh groceries.”¹ The term *food deserts* conveys a presumed absence of diversity, an absence that nature is somehow foiled from filling with complex life because only one kind of life-form—in this case, fast-food restaurants—dominates. Similarly, as the larger species of life-forms die out in the world’s oceans because of overfishing, increased acidification, rising water temperatures, and widespread pollution (such as run-offs of nitrogen fertilizers from modern industrial farms) until jellyfish, algae, and slime are all that remain, the trope of the desert comes to mind as the best way to describe what endures. Following this line of thought, the investigative journalist Taras Grescoe observes about the use of dynamite and cyanide to catch fish around Pacific coral reefs: “After 250 tonnes of cyanide and five tonnes of dynamite were used to destroy every square inch of the [Dong Sha Attoll, two hundred miles southeast of Hong Kong], it became an aquatic desert.”²

Such tropological uses of the desert signify not only an absence of diversity, but also, less obviously, a dystopic future. This becomes more apparent when one considers how more overtly literary and cultural uses of this trope render the desert into a sign for what might lie ahead. For instance, environmental writers and United Nations policy documents alike often speak of “desertification” when chronicling the dangers posed by