

Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies
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Introduction to Volume Seven: Confessing Racial Schizophrenia

Last spring I taught a class in literary theory, a course I have taught so many times before that it has become almost routine. Since I need to run through all of the methods of literary criticism in a single semester, race criticism only gets one week; indeed, it shares that one week with postcolonial criticism. One student, knowing I also teach classes in Asian American and multi-ethnic literature, asked me which of Derrick Bell's two terms I believe in, defined by Lois Tyson as

racial idealism: the conviction that racial equality can be achieved by changing people's (often unconscious) racist attitudes through such means as education, campus codes against racist speech, positive media representations of minority groups (Delgado and Stefancic 20), and the use of the law (Bell, "Racial Realism" 308).[...] *Racial realism*, in sharp contrast is the conviction that racial equality will never be achieved in the United States and that African Americans should, therefore, stop believing that it will. (382)¹

Due to the bare-bones nature of the course, I had never even gone over these specific terms with students before, let alone been asked to testify as to my own beliefs. On one level, the question posed to a white scholar and educator focused for the last twenty-five years on ethnic American literature seems to have an obvious answer. Of course I believe that whites are capable of overcoming prejudice and that education changes our world for the better. If I didn't, I would have found a different job a long time ago. However, I could not deny that my own view of the world has been profoundly shaken in the last few years. One key factor was a series of racial hate crimes that occurred on my own campus. Some young men in the dorms began racially taunting their African American suite-mate with the phrase "three-fifths" and even locked a u-lock around his neck. The fact that not only were these college students – people who had been deemed to have the intellectual capacity for college and achieving within the top thirty percent of their high schools (the measure for admission to California State Universities) – they also used a term that they must have learned about in some school lesson about the Missouri Compromise. They were not being transformed by education but were instead using distorted bits of

¹ Lois Tyson's *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (2nd Edition. NY: Routledge, 2006) is the textbook we use. I thank student Ben Camacho for this question.

education for the purposes of racial hazing. This incident has made we rethink the faith I have always placed in education as a force to transform us for the better.

This feeling of disconnect between my faith in the enormous potential of education, literature, and the law to engender equality, and the recognition of the limitations of social change was heightened in my mind this year by the U.S. Congress's refusal to even meet with President Obama's Supreme Court nomination. Yes, an African American man born of an African immigrant and raised by his single white mother can become the leader of the free world and be elected not once but twice to the office of the President of the United States. Yet, a section of America seems blithely empowered to ignore those elections and to deny his rights as President (and indeed my voice as a voter). I thought, is this not an example of both the heights to which people of color in the U.S. can rise and at the same time an example of the persistence of racism that can follow them even to that lofty height?

My ultimate answer to my student was yes, I am a racial idealist and firmly believe in the ability of both literature and education to change how we see the world. We can certainly see how education and culture have radically changed the way people, especially Americans of my students' generation, think about sexual identity. However, I also realize, in the glib shorthand of my off-the-cuff response, "you need to do all you can to keep your son from getting shot." To that extent I have become a racial realist. As I said to my class, I guess you need both people to make speeches that inspire us and urge us to change, and people who are practical and do whatever is needed to defend against prejudice that is still (and may perhaps always be) ever present and destructive. I feel that I have fallen into a kind of racial schizophrenia where I continue with the mission of education to change the world for the better even as I question how far we might be falling from the gains made as far back as the 1960's.

While violence against African Americans has been central in media images, we must not forget that the language of hate and discrimination has violent consequences for all races, as we saw with the attacks on Sikh Americans when they became mistaken lightning rods for anti-Muslim violence after 9/11. We need to use our classrooms and the texts we examine to continue to explore the subtleties of identity construction, internalized racism, microaggressions, *etc.* But as citizens of a nation, of a world, we also need to do a kind of triage—to staunch the flow of violence and blatant discrimination in the here and now as we work towards an ideal future.

As you will see from the interview with Chang-rae Lee which begins this volume, politics have been much on my mind in the last year as this election cycle in particular has reminded me in stark terms how intransigent racism and sexism are in our society. I am grateful for the students who ask me to reexamine issues that I may forget need to be continually reexamined in my own life and work. While I may have begun to question the power of education in

obliterating prejudice, I can say that working with students never fails to help me to keep learning. They make me hopeful of change.

Interviewing Chang-rae Lee is something I have wanted to do since we first started designing *AALDP* and its interview section more than eight years ago. Although during the course of the live interview we discussed all five of his novels, the realism of his latest dystopic vision, *On Such a Full Sea*, seems eerily pertinent to the current visibility of the racial and class ruptures in our society.² I would like to thank Andrew Altschul who scheduled Lee's visit to San Jose State University while he was the Director of the Center for Literary Arts, and Professor Cathy Miller, the current Director of the CLA, for asking me to do the interview. *AALDP* would like to thank David Burnett for taking the photograph which comprises this volume's cover and Lee's publicist, Glory Plata, for sharing it with us. I personally would also like to thank my assistant managing editor, Anthony Prickett, who did the hard work of finding referees not only for the essays written on canonical authors such as Lee but for pieces on authors and texts that have rarely been written on before. *AALDP* must also assert its appreciation for the many referees who do such important work anonymously. Our journal could quite literally not survive without them.

The articles that comprise our seventh volume begin with Patrick Lawrence's discussion of the narrative and aesthetic strategies of Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, two of the most often taught and therefore most canonical texts in Asian American literature. Lawrence analyzes Hagedorn and Yamashita's techniques in the context of their anti-authoritarian politics. This is followed by Christa Baiada's "Loving the Unlovable Body in Yamanaka's *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*," Lois-Ann Yamanaka collection of verse novellas, and its depictions of young women both being controlled by and resistant to patriarchal power. Baiada points out the importance of Yamanaka's first, less taught work: "*Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*... voices silenced coming-of-age stories [...] it explores a complicated interweaving of possibilities via multiple overlapping and contradicting narratives of initiation into womanhood" (52). Picking up on some of these same themes of gendered and economic forces of control, Stella Oh's essay analyzes the use of the visual media of graphic novels to represent Asian women's experience in North America. Oh's essay, "Movement and Mobility: Representing Trauma Through Graphic Narratives," stretches the definition of Asian American literature not only beyond purely verbal medium but to work

² A video of a portion of the live interview can be found at this private YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0OT2tQiE6o>

by a European Canadian author, Mark Kalesniko, and a collective, the Stanford Graphic Novel Project. Pamela Rader's essay, "'yellow crowfoot in the pond,/not lotus, not lily': Mapping the River, Mapping Voices," provides a close reading of Marilyn Chin's poem that picks up on issues of gender and control even as it examines the poem through an ecocritical lens. Denise Dillon combines biographical and psychoanalytic criticism in "The Author as The Novel Self: Shirley Lim's *Sister Swing*." Quan Manh Ha also explores issues of self-representation in his "Domestic Violence in Lac Su's *I Love Yous Are for White People: A Sociological Criticism Approach*." Ha looks at Lac Su's memoir as a critique of structural inequalities. In "Confession, Hybridity, and Language in Gina Apostol's *Gun Dealers' Daughter*," Cecilia Myers focuses specifically on language and the title character's traumatic relationship not only with the nation of her birth, The Philippines, but with the various languages spoken both in that nation and those acquired through her global existence; her fluency in English emphasizes her culpability in the problems of neocolonialism. Matthew Miller's essay, "Speaking and Mourning: Working Through Identity and Language in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*" uses a psychoanalytic approach to take up many similar issues of language, trauma, and identity as Myers's analysis. This text also brings us full circle to the volume's opening interview with novelist Chang-rae Lee.

In their analyses of the complexities of language, identity, and of the human response to both discrimination and a multitude of different kinds of trauma, these essays paint a diverse portrait of Asian American literature and culture. It is our hope that the knowledge they offer supports you in your reading and teaching. May they help incrementally to make our world a clearer, if not more coherent place. Perhaps a kind of schizophrenia, asserting both the vast potential for change and recognizing the equal potential for ourselves and our society to backslide into something ugly, hateful, and violent is actually a healthy response to the current political climate. I am reminded of a quote from Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005): "I'm always finding humans at their best and worst. I see their ugly and their beauty, and I wonder how the same thing can be both" (491). Perhaps that is the most important aspect of literature; it can give us pleasure, escape, knowledge, but it can also depict us in all our paradoxical and conflicting reality.

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