

Between Universalizing and Othering: Developing an Ethics of Reading in the Multicultural American Literature Classroom

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This essay seeks to explore some of the common challenges facing teachers of multicultural American literature, particularly in the general education classroom. More specifically, I address two typical student responses to this body of literature: the tendency to see the literature as entirely foreign and the tendency to universalize or to identify in a facile way with the text. Drawing on recent pedagogy theory, I argue that teachers of multicultural American literature need to be much more deliberate in our efforts to help students develop other, more productive ways of engaging multiethnic texts. In particular, I explore the implications of whiteness studies and what Tina Chen has called an “ethics of knowledge” for the multicultural American literature classroom. Finally, I discuss several specific texts with an eye to pedagogical strategies that help students both to see and to avoid the twin pitfalls of universalizing and othering. In my experience, foregrounding some of the theoretical and ethical questions raised by the study of multicultural American literature in a (predominantly white) university classroom can help to make students more self-conscious, ethical readers, with a much clearer sense of their own positionality in relation to textual others.

One of the most persistent and invigorating pedagogical challenges I face at my four-year, comprehensive state university is teaching race and ethnicity in general education literature classes. Like many schools of its kind in the upper Midwest, my institution lacks significant racial, ethnic, and geographical diversity in its student body. Though we have a large number of international students, primarily from Asia, most classes are comprised of predominantly white students; my most recent multicultural American literature class, for example, included one African American student, two Asian international students, and 24 white students, many of them from suburbs and small towns in the upper Midwest. Thus, my multicultural American literature class often presents the challenge, familiar to many teachers of general education courses that fulfill “multicultural” or “diversity” requirements, of engaging students of widely varying skill and interest levels in the study of texts, histories, and ideas with which they have very little familiarity or personal experience. Although my multicultural American literature courses explore a range of multiethnic literatures, I will focus here on Asian American texts; while many students have at least some cultural and discursive framework for studying African American literature, I have found that they struggle when it comes to other multicultural literatures, including texts by Asian American writers. One persistent challenge is getting my students to see Asian Americans as fully American.¹ Resistance to this idea manifests itself in all sorts of ways—talking about characters’ Asian traditions and beliefs as though they are from Asia, rather than third-generation Americans, for instance; or continuing to refer to characters—even the California hipsters in Justin Lin’s 2002 film *Better Luck Tomorrow*—as Chinese and Korean rather than Asian American. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the tendency of students to equate their own experiences with those of characters shaped by radically different

historical, social, and cultural forces—the shy, upper-middle-class, white suburban woman who sees herself as the protagonist of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), for instance. One big question for me, thus, has been how to teach multicultural American literature in a way that, on the one hand, minimizes students’ sense that these texts are foreign and entirely other to themselves and their own experience, without, on the other hand, homogenizing important racial, ethnic, cultural, and historical differences.

Some critics have suggested that the latter response—an identification that steamrolls historical and cultural particularity—stems from a kind of narcissism in students: that students look into a text about those who are different from them and can see only themselves and their own experience reflected back. As Cornel West puts it,

Students read Toni Morrison and simply look in her text and see themselves rather than the challenge of a great artist who is dealing with collective memory and community breakdown in *Beloved*, for example. Challenge. If you look in a text and see yourself, that is market education, done in the name of education. But education must not be about a cathartic quest for identity. It must foster credible sensibilities for an active critical citizenry. (qtd. in Schneider 200)

Barbara Schneider argues that the teaching of multicultural literature, because of instructors’ tendency to encourage students’ identification with texts and characters, often leads to “narcissistic reading practices that actually nurture racism” (197). This kind of narcissism can certainly present problems in the multicultural literature classroom, but it strikes me that for many students what West and Schneider identify as narcissism actually comes from a more well-intentioned impulse—from what Tina Chen has called the “humanistic impulse” to valorize

similarity in the face of alterity (158).² The central problem with such an impulse, of course, is that it can flatten particularity, difference, and the real historical, social, and political disparities that students need to recognize and understand.

So, how does one productively confront the twin pitfalls of universalizing (students concluding that “we’re all human, so we’re really no different from one another”) and reifying alterity (the conclusion that “these people are totally different from me”)? Chen argues for the need to frame the teaching of multiethnic literature in terms of an “ethics of knowledge” and to “offer a set of strategies, derived from the literature itself, that can help us teach our students to be ethically oriented towards the study of alterity” (158). Such an ethics of knowledge, she suggests, would “address the humanistic impulse that many of our students are taught to celebrate...and ask questions about the valuation of differences” (158). In other words, Chen wants to challenge the empathetic identification with the Other and the idea of intellectual mastery of a subject, both of which she sees as privileged by traditional Western educational models.

Chen points out that this ethical approach is often “centrally thematized by the literature itself” (162), and it is her attention to the formal and thematic strategies of the texts themselves, as a guide to reading and pedagogy, that I find most helpful. In my experience, the most useful strategies have been teaching students to attend very carefully to formal features of texts (and thus also selecting texts that reward formal analysis) and thoughtful sequencing of texts that helps students to navigate the ethics of reading multiethnic texts. If we want to counter students’ tendency toward narcissism and overly simplistic identification with the Other, we need to help them develop the skills to do so, to help them to see other ways of relating to texts, as well as

what is at stake in these different modes of reading. For me, this means helping students build a vocabulary for discussing race, alterity, discrimination, and oppression. One set of tools that can help them navigate this difficult terrain is tools for formal literary analysis, which can help them to see how writers are trying to position readers in relation to characters and texts. Finally, it has also become important to my multicultural literature pedagogy to explore with students the construction of whiteness itself, which can help students develop a clearer sense of their own positionality in relation to texts. For me, then, formal analysis does not serve as a retreat from the “real world” into the world of the aesthetic, but rather as an aid in helping students navigate difficult issues of identity, history, and politics. These tools are obviously only a starting point, but they go a long way toward avoiding the kinds of resistance and silent hostility that can so easily prevent productive learning from taking place in the gen ed multicultural lit classroom. In what follows, I address several texts that have worked well for me in encouraging students to engage in the kind of ethical reading that Chen describes.

As Chen suggests, one text that lends itself quite well to such ethical reading is Julie Otsuka’s haunting, lyrical *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002), a novel about one Japanese American family’s experience of the internment during World War II. The novel is comprised of five chapters, each focused on the experience of one of the four unnamed members of a Japanese American family that is uprooted from its Berkeley, California home and “relocated” to internment camps in the interior. In the first chapter, the mother prepares the family for this sudden departure. The next chapter focuses on the adolescent daughter’s experience of the journey by train to the internment camp in Utah. Chapter 3 explores the young son’s experiences in the camp. These first three chapters establish the family as an entirely typical American

family. In Chapter 1, for instance, we see the mother running errands, returning an overdue library book, and cooking and cleaning at home. However, everything that seems normal—cooking, cleaning, and feeding the dog—turns out to be horribly wrong. When she was at the hardware store, it turns out, the mother wasn't merely picking up a roll of tape and chatting with the store owner; rather, she was trying to decide whether a shovel or a hammer would be the best tool with which to kill the family's dog, which we later see her kill and bury because they can't take him with them to the camp. By opening the novel in a familiar domestic space upended by the charge of disloyalty, Otsuka highlights the absurdity of such a notion of Japanese Americans. This is a perfectly average American family whose lives are thrown into utter chaos as they are forced to leave their homes for a trip of uncertain destination and duration.

The opening scene, along with the two chapters that follow it, encourage the “humanistic impulse” to valorize similarity—in other words, for readers to focus on what is familiar, on what they have in common with those who are culturally, ethnically, or historically different from them. Indeed, this is precisely what my students tend to do: they speak about how “universal” this family seems, how they could really be “any” American family. Some students note that the son's love of baseball and comic books, as well as his romanticization of his absent father as a kind of Wild West outlaw, remind them of themselves as kids; others identify with the daughter's mild adolescent angst and confusion about her developing sexuality. Many students comment that the lack of individual names for characters—they are referred to simply as “the woman,” “the girl,” and “the boy”—invites readers to identify with them.

The novel's fourth chapter is narrated by a choral “we” and relates the family's painful return to their home in California. The house has been vandalized and looted, and there is racist

graffiti painted on the walls upstairs. The neighbors seem indifferent to both their departure and their return: “none of them came out, that morning, to wish us goodbye, or good luck, or ask us where it was we were going. None of them waved. Now when we ran into those same people on the street they turned away and pretended not to see us. Or they nodded in passing and said, ‘Gorgeous day,’ as though we had not been away at all” (115). In class, this chapter usually leads to a lively discussion of whether readers are positioned inside or outside of that “we.” Some students see the “we” as inclusive, inviting readers into identification and empathy, especially after the third-person narration of the first three chapters. These students argue that we are supposed to align ourselves with the outcast family, experiencing discrimination and marginalization from a subject position as close as possible to that of a Japanese American family in mid-1940s California. This is the line of interpretation I usually expect. But other students argue that it is more complicated; they see the “we” as evidence of an internalization of the kind of “us and them” thinking that the experience of the internment might have fostered for many Japanese Americans. These students see the “we” as referring to a family (and, more broadly, an ethnic community) united out of necessity against the hegemonic culture that presumably includes most readers of the novel. These students argue that the experiences of the family in the first three chapters would necessarily have made them feel like perpetual foreigners upon their return home from the camp; there would be no easy integration to a broader American “we” following their expulsion and internment.

Students tend to agree, however, that the novel’s final chapter, narrated in the first-person voice of the father upon his later return home from a separate camp where he has been interrogated and interned for several years, comes as a shock to readers after the first four

chapters. The father's tone is bitter, angry, and accusatory—a jarring departure from the quiet lyricism that has preceded it. He addresses a “you” that is at once his interrogators and readers themselves, offering a “confession,” full of improbable admissions of wrongdoing, that is clearly intended to placate his interrogators:

All right, I said. I admit it. I lied. You were right. You were always right. It was me. I did it. I poisoned your reservoirs. I sprinkled your food with insecticide. I sent my pears and potatoes to market full of arsenic. I planted sticks of dynamite alongside your railroads....I spied on your airfields. I spied on your naval yards. I spied on your neighbors. I spied on you—you get up at six, you like bacon and eggs, you love baseball, you take your coffee with cream, your favorite color is blue. (140-41)

The father's voice startles readers out of any easy identification and empathy we might have been feeling for the characters, as we are confronted more aggressively with the harsh reality of this family's experience of difference. Though students are disoriented by the sudden evacuation of the identificatory, empathetic reading experience they had been enjoying, they seem to sense, albeit on varying levels, what Otsuka is up to with this unusual approach to narration and point of view. Students are generally surprised to hear Michiko Kakutani's assessment that the “book is flawed by a bluntly didactic conclusion” that detracts from its otherwise “poetic evocation of the ordinary” (“War's Outcasts”). Students tend to see the narrative point of view and style of the final chapter as blunt and shocking, certainly, but also as imperative to the novel's larger themes and ideas. They feel disoriented by the ending—one student said that he felt “sucker-punched” by the last chapter—but they're quick to grasp the point: the alienation they feel here in the face

of a “confession” directed bitterly at them calls into question the truth or usefulness of their earlier empathetic identification with the characters. My most articulate students are able to describe this as Otsuka trying to get us to read more responsibly, to balance our desire to empathize, and thus understand, with our inability to identify and thus to soften the historical particularity of the characters’ experience.

The stark clarity of the tension between identification and empathy, on the one hand, and a respect for cultural difference, on the other, in Otsuka’s novel was quite helpful for my students to have in mind last spring as we turned to the next text on our syllabus: Philip Kan Gotanda’s play *The Wash* (1987). I didn’t expect this text to teach all that well—it’s a quiet, reflective story in which not a whole lot happens. It also addresses the possibility that people in their 50s and 60s sometimes have sex, a topic that is not at the top of 20-year-olds’ list of things to think about. Nevertheless, I wanted to place it after Otsuka for several reasons. First, the texts are linked in terms of content, as the memory of the internment hovers over Gotanda’s treatment of intergenerational conflict and assimilation, though it remains part of the background here rather than the centerpiece. The play also raises important questions of gender, interethnic racism and discrimination, and sexuality that I find helpful in getting students to complicate their thinking about what constitutes “Asian American” culture and identity. Finally, I wanted to explore the idea of ethical reading in the context of a different genre: how do we balance identification and respect for difference in drama, a more public, performative form, as opposed to the essentially private reading experience of reading a novel?

On the whole, I found that teaching *The Wash* directly after Otsuka’s novel allowed us to continue our discussion of the readerly balancing act that these texts require. On the one hand,

Gotanda's characters seem very recognizable in their problems and dilemmas; a number of students identified the protagonists' communication and marital problems as similar to problems they've seen in their own families, and I was struck by how adept they were at thinking through the symbols of tradition and adaptation that Gotanda introduces. They were quick to identify the protagonist Nobu's kite-making, for instance, as an indication of his connection to traditional Japanese culture. They also noted that his continued reliance on his estranged wife Masi to do his laundry once a week, despite their separation, represents a very traditional understanding of gender roles that seems to exercise more power over Nobu and Masi than the bond of marriage itself. In this respect, students saw Masi's decision at the end of the play to stop doing Nobu's laundry as the most dramatic moment of the play, though it is staged very quietly, with no dialogue. The stage directions simply state, "Masi takes the bag of dirty clothes and moves towards the door, then stops. She makes up her mind about something she has been struggling with for a while. Masi returns to the kitchen and leaves the bag of Nobu's dirty clothes on the table. As she opens the door to leave, Masi looks back at Nobu and watches him for a brief moment. During this whole time, Nobu has never turned around to look at Masi though he is very aware of what is going on. Masi sadly turns and exits through the door" (198). The play ends with Nobu sitting silently in front of the television, his phone ringing in the background, the pile of left-behind wash "illuminated by a shaft of light" (198). Students were also intrigued by an earlier scene that depicts technology as a symbol of the divide between those who resist change and those willing to adapt—a contrast with which students could easily identify. In this scene, Nobu calls Masi's new apartment and becomes completely befuddled by her new telephone answering machine; meanwhile, Masi stands in a different area of the stage, perfecting

her casting technique in preparation for a fishing trip with her new boyfriend Sadao (168). Students observe that Nobu seems incapable of moving forward or embracing new things and experiences, while Masi eagerly takes on new challenges and seems to enjoy the expansion of her world following her separation from Nobu. Students easily identify with these characters and their different responses to change, seeing them not as Japanese American but as representative of a very common set of conflicts.

At the same time, however, students' easy identification with the characters is complicated by the play's frequent use of Japanese names and phrases, particularly in scenes that feature Kiyoko, a widowed Japanese immigrant and restaurant owner who is interested in Nobu, and Curley, a Hawaiian *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese American) who works at Kiyoko's restaurant. (Curley's occasional lapses into pidgin generally prove even more impenetrable than the characters' Japanese.) The play's use of a foreign language functions as a reminder, for most non-Japanese-speaking students, of their distance from these characters and their experiences. Although the Japanese is glossed on the page, students pointed out that audiences viewing the play would not have access to these translations; anyone without knowledge of Japanese would thus be a bit in the dark about the exact meaning. Our discussion of Gotanda's use of Japanese words and phrases helped students to understand that Gotanda is after a similar kind of effect as Otsuka: he wants us to identify with and relate to these characters, on the one hand, but he also wants to insist on the specificity of their cultural and historical background and to preserve it as such. In this way, readers and theatre-goers cannot overlook cultural particularity, but they also don't see these characters as entirely alien to themselves. As Gotanda himself remarked, when asked about the transition of his work in the late 1980s from primarily Asian American to more

mainstream theaters, “Even though my work was being presented at these larger venues, I refused to compromise the material or try to make it more accessible to a particular audience. The audience should come to you. This may seem arrogant, but what it amounts to is a leap of faith” (Omi xvi). What surprised me, in the end, was my students’ willingness and ability to take that “leap of faith” with Gotanda as they read this play. In some ways, the shift in genres, as we moved from Otsuka’s novel to Gotanda’s play, helped to open up our discussion of ethical reading, to think about how it works differently in the private experience of silent reading and in the public space of live theater. The play’s basic realism seems to encourage identification, while its more impressionist elements work to complicate the empathy and familiarity experienced by readers and viewers. For instance, the simultaneous staging of multiple scenes on different parts of the stage, as well as Gotanda’s reliance on lighting and symbols, rather than dialogue, to convey certain ideas, lends a certain compression to the play and complicates the audience’s efforts to suspend disbelief. Though they work in different ways, Gotanda’s play and Otsuka’s novel offer vivid illustrations of the balancing act required of readers and audiences—the necessity of situating oneself between identification and respect for alterity.

Moving from more traditional literary genres to the graphic novel, with Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006), has helped me to cement the ethical reading practice that has become a cornerstone of my multicultural literature pedagogy. This is a very complicated text, but let me offer a brief overview of the way the three parts of the narrative fit together. In one strand, Jin Wang, the son of two Chinese immigrants to the US, moves with his family from San Francisco’s Chinatown to a more suburban location where he becomes a minority student at Mayflower Elementary; this part of the graphic novel focuses on Jin’s experience of bullying and

ostracism, as well as his growing desire to transform himself into someone else in order to fit in better. Another strand offers a retelling of the Chinese legend of the Monkey King, whose grand ambitions for immortality and power are hindered by the fact that he is just a monkey; his efforts to “improve” himself result in his being punished by the god Tze-Yo-Tzuh, buried under a mountain of rock for 500 years. The final strand of the novel depicts a fictional sitcom entitled “Everyone Ruvs Chin-Kee,” about a painfully stereotypical Chinese exchange student who comes to stay with his blond, all-American cousin Danny, much to Danny’s horror. As several critics have noted, Chin-Kee embodies both nineteenth- and twentieth-century stereotypes of the Chinese in America: he wears Qing dynasty clothing and hair queue, ogles American women, eats cat gizzards for lunch, carries his belongings in oversized Chinese takeout containers, speaks heavily accented English, and eagerly answers every question teachers ask at school.³

Eventually, the three strands of the narrative converge: Danny turns out to be Jin Wang’s fantasy version of himself, as Jin’s desire to transform himself—to fit in at school, to get the attention of the popular Amelia Harris—is so intense that it actually happens. Chin-Kee turns out to be the Monkey King in disguise (and also the father of Jin’s school friend Wei-Chen), and he helps to teach Jin a lesson about the perils of transforming oneself too completely; as he remarks near the end of the novel, “You know, Jin, I would have saved myself from five hundred years’ imprisonment beneath a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey” (223).

This overview does not do justice to Yang’s sophisticated narrative, but let me briefly identify a couple of the ways in which I have found *American Born Chinese* to be a productive text to teach in my multicultural American literature classes. To begin, *American Born Chinese*

has helped me to discourage students from equating references to Asian traditions, myths, and folktales with foreignness, otherness, or an inscrutable old-world mystique. In this way, I have found that *American Born Chinese* works quite well when paired with Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, another Chinese American bildungsroman that addresses the desire for self-transformation in the face of marginalization and the simultaneous appeal and repugnance of assimilation. I have struggled in teaching *The Woman Warrior* to get students to understand how Kingston uses traditional Chinese stories, myths, and folktales: these stories end up reifying an old-world China in the minds of many students, who come away from *The Woman Warrior* seeing the figures in Kingston's memoir as more Chinese than American—still consumed with the ideas and traditions of the old world, rather than actively translating and reinventing them in their new world in the US. This has a lot to do with the sheer difficulty of Kingston's memoir, of course—the non-linear narrative, the changes in narrative point of view, the density of symbol and allusion, the sophisticated language and style. With Yang's graphic novel, however, students sense very quickly that he is putting traditional material, particularly the legend of the Monkey King, to work in innovative, non-traditional ways. They seem to understand fairly readily that this world of legend and allusion is available to Yang in much the same way European American writers might allude to Greek or Biblical figures and stories; this understanding, in turn, helps students to read Kingston's memoir with greater nuance and appreciation for its adaptation of traditional material. Pairing these texts helps students to see, as Lisa Lowe puts it, that "The making of Asian American culture includes practices that are partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented" (65).

In other words, students tend not to fall into the essentializing mode with *American Born Chinese* in the way they sometimes do with *The Woman Warrior*. Why not? One possibility is the graphic novel's representation of common middle school experiences and traumas. Lan Dong suggests that *American Born Chinese* is a book with "universal appeal to young adults": "In many respects, the character Jin's struggle is that of a typical teenager, regardless of his or her ethnic or cultural background" (243). Yang's representation of middle school experience indeed resonates with most students, as Yang refers to many familiar aspects of American childhood, including transformer toys and sitcoms with painful racial stereotypes that nevertheless garner big laughs from the studio audience. (Students often see Chin-Kee as similar to Long Duk Dong, from *Sixteen Candles*, or Mickey Rooney's character in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*—characters they acknowledge as terrible stereotypes but that do not diminish their pleasure in the films.) It strikes me, however, that Yang's inclusion of the Chin-Kee sitcom counters the identification and empathy that many students instinctively feel with the Jin Wang thread. Most readers remember feeling ostracized and worthless in middle school, even if it was for reasons other than race or ethnicity, so it's easy to empathize with Jin and his desire to become someone new. But "Everyone Ruvs Chin-Kee" is so excessive and alienating—while also offering a surprisingly accurate summary of long-standing Asian American stereotypes—that students have to keep in mind that this is what Jin is up against, ultimately: these are the stereotypes that Jin confronts every day at school.

In my experience, thus, students' response to *American Born Chinese* is more nuanced and sophisticated than their response to *The Woman Warrior* not because the former is somehow more "universal" in content, but largely because of the difference in genre. Although both

authors require readers to work hard to link seemingly disparate narratives, students are more willing to engage in this kind of active reading and speculation, with better results, with Yang's text. As many have argued, graphic novels require particularly active reading, as readers work to resolve the competing demands of image and text and to fill in the spaces between panels in an effort to create a unified narrative. Jared Gardner argues that comics are "the most compressed, the most dependent on ellipses and lacunae" of all modern narrative forms, and thus they are "a profoundly collaborative narrative form" (138). Furthermore, Gardner notes, as the three strands of *American Born Chinese* converge, we are required to read recursively—to double back to earlier sections to reinterpret them in light of new information and understanding (141).⁴ The active deciphering required by the graphic novel results in readers' acute awareness of their own implicatedness in the process of making meaning. As students' varying interpretations of individual panels are voiced in class, it becomes quite clear just how much each reader must contribute to the process of making meaning with this text.

Yang's graphic novel, and the mode of active reading required by the genre, have helped me to approach the concept of whiteness in more effective ways in the multicultural literature classroom. As a number of scholars have argued, teaching multiethnic literature responsibly and effectively requires one to address just what whiteness signifies in our culture. As teachers of literature, we often spend a great deal of time and energy discussing the construction of gender roles and stereotypes of minority groups, but it is also crucial to help students see how the meaning of whiteness is assembled in similar ways. To many students, particularly in the case of a predominantly white classroom, whiteness is simply the norm or the default—the thing you are when you aren't anything else. Getting students to see whiteness as a construct, rather than some

natural or “real” identity category, can be difficult and often creates discomfort and tension in the classroom, in large part because it confronts white students with the uncomfortable reality that even if they are not themselves racist, they continue to benefit from white privilege in countless ways.

Texts that feature multiracial characters and the complexities of racial passing, such as Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1999), have certainly helped me to problematize whiteness for students. But *American Born Chinese* has also proven to be an excellent text to use in addressing the construction of whiteness with students; I usually encounter less resistance to discussions of white privilege here than I do with other texts. The fluidity of identity in this text—particularly the flexibility of racial and ethnic identity, as the Chinese American Jin becomes the Caucasian Danny—helps students to see its constructedness, as well as the benefits and liabilities of particular racial and ethnic identities. Furthermore, the cross-species transformation of the Monkey King into Chin-Kee pushes these ideas to another level, as we explore the long history of equating racial and ethnic others with animals. If students are troubled by the painful stereotypes put to use in Yang’s Chin-Kee, they become even more uncomfortable when they realize the ease with which the stereotypes slide into the non-human, in the association of Chinese with animals.⁵ This element of *American Born Chinese* allows us to discuss ways in which the construction of racial and ethnic identities changes over time. I point out that, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Irish were often depicted in cartoons as monkeys and apes, a representative tradition that associated them with blackness rather than whiteness. Most of my students are surprised by this history of representation—and on the day that a student happened to be proudly wearing a “Kiss me, I’m Irish” shirt, the point about the

constructedness of identity was even more easily made. As Min Hyoung Song puts it, “The malleability of the simian as a form of racial representation highlights how empty of content racial representation itself is, and how it can therefore be circulated to mean several different things at different moments” (6-7).

Ultimately, then, my goal in bringing whiteness studies to bear on our study of multicultural American literature is part of my effort to foster an ethics of reading; I want my students to see more clearly that the positionality of the reader is part of the equation in studying this material. Readers are not neutral parties, but rather are always already implicated in some way in the system of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences that we are studying in class—even if the texts seem far removed from us historically or culturally. As Gregory Jay puts it, there is a difference between our “subjective positionality” and our “objective positionality”: one may not *feel* dominant (and thus privileged) as a white person, but that does not change one’s objective position of privilege (109-10). Who we are as readers necessarily shapes our interactions with texts, particularly as we navigate the twin pitfalls of universalizing and reifying alterity. While Chen’s discussion of ethical reading practices acknowledges this implicitly, it is scholars in whiteness studies who have most helped me find ways to encourage students to consider their own position in relation to texts, as well as to diffuse potential resistance and awkward silences in my predominantly white classroom.

As I hope I have made clear, my pedagogical focus on formal features of texts is by no means a desire for some kind of New Critical retreat into the text, away from the real world in which these issues have such enormous implications for people, including my students.⁶ Rather, I’m suggesting that formal analysis can be a useful tool to help students get a handle on difficult

issues of representation, power, and difference. It's easy for students to feel overwhelmed and thus to shut down—to take the facile identification route, or to refuse to engage with the hard work of thinking critically about the experience of the Other. They know—or they realize, with a little bit of prompting—that they are implicated in and connected to discriminatory practices of the past and present, and most of them *care* about this; they don't want simply to shrug it off under the belief that “the past has nothing to do with me.” Nevertheless passive or paralyzing guilt isn't useful either. Helping students recognize the ways in which texts and authors aim to elicit particular responses in readers goes a long way toward a more ethical, less universalizing mode of reading and encountering others.

Notes

¹ For discussions of Asian Americans as “perpetual strangers,” see Ronald Takaki and David Leiwei Li.

² In Gregory Jay’s view, the “celebratory multiculturalism” most students encounter in their K-12 education may also factor into the “humanistic impulse” we see in the college classroom. Students have been taught that they are simply supposed to see and celebrate difference, but the goal of a college-level multicultural literature course should be, as Jay suggests, a critical multiculturalism that engages students in study of the structures of power that produce discrimination, oppression, and marginalization.

³ Yang himself commented, in his 2007 Printz Award speech, “With Chin-Kee, I attempted to tie today’s popular images of Asians and Asian-Americans with the more overtly racist imagery prevalent in the late 1800s and early 1900s” (qtd. in Chaney 138-39). Chaney notes that Chin-Kee “ma[kes] flesh exactly what Jin Wang abjects in himself” (136). Jared Gardner insightfully observes that in Chin-Kee Yang cleverly combines the nineteenth-century Chinaman and yellow peril stereotypes with the twentieth century’s model minority stereotype. Gardner points out that although these are commonly discussed as negative and positive stereotypes, respectively, today they are often conflated, as in the notion of alien Asian hordes “ruthlessly stealing spots in elite universities and in the halls of power from other (white) children” (134).

⁴ For a discussion of genre and modes of reading in *American Born Chinese*, see also Min Hyoung Song.

⁵ For excellent discussions of the monkey as a symbol of racial otherness in *American Born Chinese*, see Song and Gardner.

⁶ As Laurie Grobman notes, aesthetic approaches to literature are often viewed with skepticism these days: “Aesthetics is equated with the status quo and efforts to dominate and oppress others. From this perspective, by passing on to generations of students Western virtues and ideas through the study of the Great Books, literary studies reinscribes hegemonic knowledge and social injustices” (140). For some scholars, she observes, “even multiethnic literary studies is insufficiently political in that it leaves students and faculty insulated in the academy and does not accomplish real-world or pragmatic change” (141). Like Grobman, I do not see attention to the aesthetic as necessarily or inherently escapist or apolitical.

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