

Review

Han, Stephanie. *Swimming in Hong Kong*. Spokane, WA: Willow Springs Books, 2016.
134 pp. \$19.95 paper.

Reading *Swimming in Hong Kong* brings one into company with individuals awash in the idea that across geographies, the challenges of being somehow outside, alone, or different are never far. The characters in this short story collection, all women of varying ethnicities and homelands around the Pacific, speak to the reader from multiple locales—from Hong Kong to Waterton, from Nantucket to Seoul. Yet common among them are feelings of being out of place somehow, in their environments, in their social circles, and even in the direction of their life paths. Inhabiting a world where movement between Korea, Hong Kong, and the United States is commonplace and done for pleasure as much as for survival, these characters grapple with forms of displacement that are intensified by regional cultural biases. Whether the career woman, the homeless city dweller, or the student; whether one who has left home, or one who has been left at home: each individual's experience of exile prompt her to question where she is going. How do her appearance, ethnicity, and class shape her aspirations in a world that is so particularly routed?

The stories, set mostly in Korea, China, and the United States in the 1980s, explore how regional attitudes regarding racial difference, female independence, and homeland, structure these characters' lives. The speaker in "Invisible," for instance, has expert knowledge of how non-local Asian women in Hong Kong are inspected:

Together with your husband in the U.S. you were thought of as too yellow, too white, too privileged, too educated, too foreign, too poor, too rich, too loud, too quiet, too American, too Asian, too European. You and your husband occupy that space in between. You have what the far left and the far right seem to uncannily agree is undesirable and problematic: a mixed marriage." (12)

The women throughout the collection are similarly conscious of how their bodies and life choices are judged. So sensitive are they to the perceived strangeness of their own situations—as expatriates, as single women, as racial minorities in cultures that worship whiteness—that they lose track of their own aspirations and survival needs.

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While loneliness reverberates across the collection, Han brings more than a set of intriguing dramas. The book's greater concern is that this displacement is in fact systemically and environmentally produced. Regional attitudes and these patterns of loneliness, Han suggests, are consistent with cultural shifts stirred by transpacific movement. Hana in "Canyon" wrestles with the implications of leaving her family and a troubled relationship in Kwangju, to "start over" in California; in "Hong Kong Rebound" a local girl describes her working father's ritual of watching soccer games through a fancy restaurant window, as expatriates and other elites dine inside. These experiences, while shaped by characters' actions, are also produced by transpacific circuits etched by global capitalism, commerce, tourism, and war, in the twentieth century. The circuits enable these characters to escape traumatic pasts, to connect with family, to work, and of course, to find love.

The geographical sweep of *Swimming in Hong Kong* is impressive, and would make the collection an asset in a literature or Asian American studies course. Han's carefully chosen details trace several geopolitical phenomena that serve as starting points for critical thinking and historicization. Understanding the dramas requires students to grasp the conditions that produced inter-Asia migration, migration from Korea to the United States, Asian American activism, and social divisions occurring in elite playgrounds like Hong Kong and Nantucket. Its setting in the 1980s, in the shadow of the Korean War and the war in Vietnam, provides further push to examine these patterns' development. Why would a Korean American teenager from California find herself friends with a white girl from Georgia, while spending the summer in Seoul? What kind of social climate would an African American woman encounter while working for an Ivy League-educated Hong Kong businessman? How did Korean women land in Hong Kong, and what compelled them to stay?

Han manages the breadth of history sketched by her characters' circumstances through a masterful selection of details that help readers see the wider context surrounding these figures. In "Invisible," the speaker's reference to the local biases gives way to questions about how the biases formed:

You are not a *gweilo*, a foreign devil, or a ghost person, a term of insult, but a foreigner of another kind. Your complexion is not olive, a sign to the doorman that you could be Filipina, which in most places in this city guarantees a disparaging glance... You aren't Han Chinese; you are Korean (10).

For those whose knowledge of Hong Kong's racial politics only conjures the long-standing binary between Chinese and whites, the idea of being a "foreigner of another kind" complicates the picture. Students may use a passage like this to examine

racialization in colonial Hong Kong, and to discover histories of racialized labor and ethnic hierarchies that are inflected by class and gender. The balance Han creates between the story's drama, and the global and historical context around it invites critical thinking about the circuits—particularly of war—that create these dramas.

Only in rare moments in the collection do explanations of the characters' circumstances feel comparatively heavy-handed, with the text seeming more eager to explain the tensions these characters face. There is one such moment in "The Body Politic" which dramatizes the clash between politics and romance found across stories of student activism. The university student, Sabrina, is infatuated with an artist, Martin, believing him to be "a rebel who would cement [her] arrival as a revolutionary, woman, and sophisticate" (23). Sabrina soon finds that her innocent anticipation of intimacy with her new crush is no match for Martin's aggressive advances. After a sexual encounter bordering on violent, her decision to cut Martin off comes as a relief. Months later, she reflects on Martin's significance:

For a long time, I viewed Martin as my first introduction to casual sex and sexual politics. [...] As an adolescent, I could not see the schism between action and words, and my sorrow only came years later when I realized how easy it is for innocence to be lost in the brutal quest for understanding and self. (33)

Sabrina's hindsight affirms the hard-learned truth of activism's contradictions which only intensify when involving the personal. Yet what remains understated in her reflection is the fact that her jolt from innocence involved a physical assault on her racialized female body. While it is true that she acknowledges the situation's "sorrow," it is hard to ignore how contained the violence feels to the reader. This tension between Sabrina's experience of the aggression and her summation of the situation would be an interesting discussion point in an advanced course.

Advanced students might also benefit from discussion of how white masculinity is represented. In addition to the Martin character, other white men featured in relationships with Asian protagonists are cast as orientalist chauvinists constantly committing textbook sins. Cue the businessman in "The Ki Difference" who laments restaurant service in Seoul after barking orders in English to the Korean-speaking wait staff. On one hand, Han's characters refuse these men's demands and end up making choices on behalf of a more independent, emboldened self. At the same time, students might consider whether Han's nuanced take on racialization matches the complexity with which she characterizes white men.

But these smaller points cannot offset the richness of Han's challenges to naive notions of diversity. Stories like "Nantucket Laundry" exemplify the collection's attunement to recent expressions of racial inequality. Lydia, a Korean American teen takes a summer job in Nantucket to experience independence and adulthood before starting community college. While working among rich white tourists, Lydia finds herself the target of old stereotypes and ignorant attitudes towards people of color. As if in a time warp, the bar flies sling "chink" at her; she is mistaken for her Filipina co-worker. And in the most provocative throw-back to old racism, Lydia participates in this scene as a Nantucket laundry worker. Here, Han's story invokes histories of Chinese laundries and Asian domestic labor, quite literally linking histories of racialized labor to a modern-day situation. The story jokes that the old stereotype is still with us.

While *Swimming in Hong Kong's* breadth and historical weavings might shine most readily in an introductory course, it can easily provoke compelling conversations for advanced students. Its lasting reward is its challenge to readers to consider the ever-changing task of navigating through old prejudices and financial instability. The title's swimming metaphor describes the characters' hopes for fluidity and self-determination in their lives—to master their own movements in labor, lifestyle, and love, without being drawn under by expectations. While we understand that struggle against loneliness continues at the close of each tale, and while the collection makes us aware of other displacements produced by global movement, the critical insights revealed in each tale are inspiringly powerful strokes in the struggle to belong comfortably in the self.

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