

## Introduction to Volume Eight: Wins and Losses

This has been a very good year for Asian American literary and cultural studies. Viet Thanh Nguyen, the 2016 Pulitzer Prize winner, just gave a reading from his work and spoke with Andrew Lam in a visit to my campus, San José State. Viet Nguyen joins Jhumpa Lahiri as the first two Asian Americans to earn Pulitzer Prizes in Fiction.<sup>1</sup> Just this month it was announced that Nguyen has joined the rarified group of Asian American creative writers who have been honored by the MacArthur Foundation when he was named as a 2017 Fellow. *American Born Chinese*, the graphic novel created by the only American-born Asian American creative writer to earn the MacArthur “genius” award, Gene Luen Yang, was written about in the inaugural issue of *AALDP*. Now, seven years later, we have the privilege of interviewing Yiyun Li who was named a MacArthur fellow in 2010.

It has also been a good year for those of us at *AALDP*. This year *AALDP* Editorial Board Member, Rowena Tomaneng, was appointed President of Berkeley City College. Karen Chow is President of the Academic Senate at De Anza College and Pamela Thoma is working on an exciting and long-needed book project on Karen Tei Yamashita for the MLA. In July I became the Acting Chair of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at SJSU. On October 24, both Wei Ming Dariotis and Rowena Tomaneng participated in the first hearing on the status of Asian American Studies in California’s colleges and universities that was hosted by UC Davis’s Asian American Studies Department in collaboration with the State Senate Select Committee on Asian Pacific Islander Affairs and the Asian & Pacific Islander Legislative caucus. It was the first of its kind to bring together faculty and administrators from all three areas of public higher education in California: the California Community Colleges, the California State University System, and the University of California.

Although it has been a good year for Asian Americans in the realm of literature and for many of us personally, it has been a horrible year for America. I had relatives affected by three different hurricanes: Harvey, Irma, and Nate. Our hearts go out to the people still facing the effects of Hurricane Maria and the shootings in Las Vegas. The air has finally cleared here in the southern half of the San Francisco Bay where many outdoor activities were cancelled earlier this month due to the poor air quality created by the deadly fires to the north of us in Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties (not to mention a smaller fire nearby in the Santa Cruz Mountains). Looking beyond our national boundaries, the loss of life in the earthquakes in Mexico and the directly man-made disasters of the ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, and the needless human suffering caused by the

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<sup>1</sup> Pakistani American Playwright Ayad Akhtar earned the 2013 Pulitzer in drama for *Disgraced*.

many wars going on around the world and the refugee crises that wars almost inevitably create seems to put a somber cast over everything this year.

Exacerbating the effect of these tragedies is the failure of leadership in so many cases from Washington to Myanmar, with leaders seemingly unable or unwilling to act for the good of people as a whole above the good of a few (or of just their own self interest). Some of these failures of leadership seem to come, ironically, out of peoples' very fear of what lies ahead. Psychologists and neuroscientists are finding that fear is actually part of what reinforces more conservative beliefs such as we have seen in the rise of right-wing extremism in both the US and Europe.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we could be facing a self-perpetuating cycle of crisis and fear, specifically fear of "the other," be that racial, ethnic, gendered, religious, or class-based. These very fears of loss are causing many in democratic societies to think about the world as a kind of zero-sum game in which ensuring others' loss somehow ensures one's own wins and vice versa, creating thoughts such as, "If that race is not allowed the right to vote or basic safety and dignity, I will have more rights in contrast," or "If women receive more respect, men will get less." However, as we can plainly see just from events of the last month: losses to humanity anywhere are losses to us all; there are no winners.

I try to remember in times like these that literature has a two-fold and even paradoxical ability to both allow us to escape from our reality and to remind us of us our responsibility to the world around us. Becoming chair of my department has made me ever more conscious that human psyches are as fragile as our environment. Sometimes the escape that literature offers is as necessary (in small doses) as is the call to connect to and understand the world. Yiyun Li's new memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* was helpful to me in thinking about the impact of mental illness and in reminding me how little I understand it. Literature also provides its readers with an almost magical connection to other people and thus builds empathy, an ability that seems in all too short supply today. In her memoir, Li brings the vivid and intense nature of the relationship between readers and writers to life. My hope is that we as teachers and readers can use the connection between peoples, between psyches, that literature provides to replace fear with knowledge.

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In addition to the interview, this volume of *AALDP* contains six new articles. In the first essay, Wilson Chen offers a method of teaching Eddie Huang's memoir, *Fresh Off the Boat*, that places it in the context of a long history of American literacy narratives and offers suggestions for getting students to engage in an analysis of Huang's complicated racial and gendered stances. Quan-Manh Ha and Chase Greenfield tackle a similarly problematic gender construction of the *femme fatale* trope in Vu Tran's debut noir thriller, *Dragonfish*, analyzing the role

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<sup>2</sup> Here are just a sampling of articles describing these findings: Nigel Barber, "Conservatives Big on Fear, Brain Studies Find," *Psychology Today* (April 19, 2011); Emily Laber-Warren, "Unconscious Reactions Separate Liberals and Conservatives," *Scientific American* (September 1, 2012); and Bobby Azarian, "Fear and Anxiety Drive Conservatives' Political Beliefs," *Psychology Today* (December 31, 2016).

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of trauma in the detective story populated by former “Boat People.” In the third essay, Louis Parascandola and Rajul Punjabi explore the role of language and the pressures of acculturation in Ha Jin’s short stories set in America. Brian Chen returns us to the topic of the Southeast Asian Diaspora as he analyzes strikingly similar images of walking and wandering in T.C. Huo’s depiction of Laotian refugees, *Land of Smiles*, and Lê Thi Diem Thúy’s representation of Vietnamese refugees, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and how these images of peripatetic life might be read as claiming a more assertive identity and agency for diasporic peoples. Holly Martin’s essay examines the representations of mixed race people and their fates in all five of Chang-rae Lee’s novels, finding that through a kind of doubling device the children both symbolize society’s prejudices against mixed race individuals and serve as harbingers of hope and change. In the final essay, Cristina Rodriguez uses the concepts of Henri Lefebvre to explore Karen Yamashita’s representations of space in Los Angeles in *Tropic of Orange*, grounding the text in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Los Angeles. This volume concludes with Stephanie Chan’s review of Hong Kong and Hawaii-based Korean American writer Stephanie Han’s new book, *Swimming in Hong Kong*.

Near the beginning of Yiyun Li’s memoir, she writes, “I used to write from midnight to four o’clock” (8). When I read that I experienced an odd mix of emotions: recognition (this journal would have never been founded if I hadn’t been able at one period of my life to put my son to bed at 8 PM each night and work from then until midnight), deep admiration of her productivity and stamina, and deep concern at the impact that such a long-term lack of sleep could have on a person’s health. We want to express our appreciation for all of you who have spent your extra time and even stolen from your sleep to create, write, and read. We would also like to express our gratitude to Joanne Lamb for creating this volume’s cover using a photo provided by Yiyun Li (originally produced by the MacArthur Foundation). We are especially grateful to Jessie Mai Fussell for her energetic work as *AALDP*’s assistant managing editor. It is through the volunteer efforts of all of our writers, reviewers, and editors that we have been able to continue to provide *AALDP* for free to all of our readers for the past eight years. Thank you for serving. And thank you for reading.

----Noelle Brada-Williams,  
October 29, 2017  
San José State University