

Introduction to Volume Eleven: Reading, Writing, and Teaching in the Whirlwind

Since the last regular volume of *AALDP* was published, so much has changed in this world that it feels like we have been caught up in a whirlwind with no stable foothold. The whole world has been impacted by a deadly pathogen that has not only killed so many (as of Spring 2022 nearly a million in the United States alone and six million worldwide), but impacted public health systems that have led to additional deaths, created mental health crises, and even damaged the health of our social and political institutions. We have also started to experience the noticeable consequences of climate change. Democratic institutions in the US and around the world have experienced a loss of faith, and in some cases, even armed attacks. There has been a growth in the last few years in both greater consciousness of the effects of racism in the United States, and a greater expression of white supremacy and racism. So many different forces are currently impacting human society right now, that it is difficult to determine what are root causes and what are responses to other forces.

This storm of issues has had a huge impact on the field of Asian American Studies. The pandemic has supplied a pretext for those who—either through delusion or strategic self-interest—want to scapegoat people of Asian descent as the cause of it all. A recent NBC news article, reporting on a report by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, noted that there has been an uptick in anti-Asian violence in the United States of reportedly 339% in 2021 alone (and that is in comparison to 2020 which had already seen a precipitous rise from 2019)¹ In the midst of this, political forces are trying to prevent educational institutions in the United States from teaching about race, gender, and events in American history that have created the current circumstances.

According to *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg, Conservative activist Christopher Rufo came up with the idea to link the legal discourse of Critical Race Theory to anything and everything that

¹ Kimmy Yam, “Anti-Asian Hate Crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says” Jan 31, 2022. *NBC News* <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-339-percent-nationwide-last-year-repo-rcna14282>

could be perceived to be wrong with contemporary education. In his own words:

The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think “critical race theory.” We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans. (Rufo Twitter post cited in Goldberg)²

As Goldberg notes, “he has pretty much succeeded.” A whole range of people have either bought into this “recodifying” of the term or seen it as convenient for their political interests as it has led some local parents’ groups to believe that Critical Race Theory is being taught to children in grade school and for the governors of Texas and Florida to support censorship of texts discussing race, gender, or sexuality. Even in seemingly more liberal states like New York, books such as Kelly Yang’s children’s novel, *Front Desk*, based on her own life as a Chinese immigrant working with her family to manage a motel, were banned. One reason given by parents attempting to ban *Front Desk* was that it depicted a “white police officer falsely accusing a Black motel guest of theft” and they referred to it as a “CRT book.”³ While banning already famous and revered books such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* have backfired and driven up sales, the threat of banning can have more dire impacts for lesser-known authors or potential authors if publishers, especially of books for younger children, make publishing decisions based on what can or cannot be sold in populous states where book banning is in full swing.

This new American embrace of censorship seems to be an attempt to flee from our shared history, just as some have used violence to fight individuals they want to believe are the causes of our past or contemporary ills such as the pandemic. A 2021 Commonwealth Club presentation called “Addressing Anti-Asian Violence” brought together a discussion with Stop AAPI Hate co-founder Russell Jeung, Oakland City Council President Nikki Fortunato Bas, Michelle Kim, and Michelle Meow for a very helpful nuanced discussion of what remedies are available for protecting our communities from hate crimes. To the “flight or fight”

² Michelle Goldberg, “The Maddening Critical Race Theory Debate.” *The New York Times*. June 28, 2021.

³ Beth Greenfield, “Why parents tried to ban this children’s book about a Chinese Immigrant Family” *Yahoo! Life*. October 5, 2021.

response, Russell Jeung asserted a third possibility—“flocking,” that is, finding strength in community.⁴ Kimmy Yam, in her article on the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans, notes that “Black Americans remained the most targeted” victims of hate crimes in 2021. John C. Yang, director of Asian Americans Advancing Justice, seems to echo Jeung’s call to “flock” when he stated, “Especially during a time when groups are trying to divide and pit vulnerable communities against each other, we must remember that we are stronger together” (quoted in Yam).

Emily Chan designed the cover of this volume to reflect the uncertainty we are all facing during the pandemic. Since she designed this cover, the world has gained the additional stress of Russia launching a war in the Ukraine. As shocking as that event has been, it has driven the United States closer to its allies and even brought some unity within the very divided United States. Perhaps “flocking” will indeed be what gets us out of our current turmoil.

One bright spot for me in the time since our last regular volume was interviewing novelist Susan Choi. Her work has tackled many events that have had life changing impact on both people and national cultures, such as the Korean War in her award-winning *The Foreign Student*, the Unibomber and the Wen Ho Lee case in *Person of Interest*, or Wendy Yoshimura and sixties radicalism in *American Woman*. Her most recent novel, *Trust Exercise*, examines the nature and potency of narrative itself.

In “Orientalism Restated in the Era of Covid-19,” Joey S. Kim contextualizes the current era of violence against Asian Americans within the long history of anti-Asian rhetoric such as yellow peril. The essay explores how orientalist rhetoric has laid the ground work for the “precarity” of contemporary Asian American bodies. Her piece also draws on Ling Ma’s prescient 2018 novel, *Severance*, which imagines a world-wide plague with origins in China, as well as Cathy Park Hong’s 2020 essay collection, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*.

Like Kim, Laura Wright, in her essay “Wages of Resistance: A Consideration of Time in Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*,” also explores the precarity of the human body. Wright begins with Hagedorn’s depiction of

⁴ “Addressing Anti-Asian Violence,” a virtual presentation by the Commonwealth club in March 2021, is an excellent resource for teachers and students wanting a more in-depth discussion of both the causes and remedies of anti-Asian violence. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCS1nC2HwP4&t=1459s>

the incredible loss of the workers who died building the Manila Film Center in 1981. Wright ingeniously combines the insights of Marx about the role of time compression in oppressing workers whose labor is defined by time and Genette's narratological insights into the nature of time in narrative to show how Hagedorn uses the formal elements of her novel to disrupt attempts by the powerful to control the narrative of the underclass.

Although *AALDP* has had the mission since its founding more than a decade ago to focus on the teaching of Asian American literature at both the college and high school levels, we have never yet included an essay which examines Asian American representations for younger readers. Thus, we are very pleased to include the essay "Searching for Mirror Books for Young Asian/Asian American Children with Disabilities." The authors Meacham, Wee, Hsieh, Chen, and Davis describe their struggle to find picture books for young children that accurately and effectively reflect back the lives of children who are both Asian and disabled. While those of us who teach young adult and adult learners are increasingly presented with a wealth of diverse writings within the ever-expanding canon of Asian American literature, this essay serves to remind us both how far this expansion still has to go and how fundamental reading is to identity formation. Drawing on the insights of Rudine Sims Bishop's 1990 coinage of the terms "mirrors" and "windows" to describe the way that books can both reflect our identities back to us and offer us insight into another culture or experience, this essay reminds us all how much literature is a key tool not only in how we see ourselves, but how we learn to live together with empathy and understanding.

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