

## Introduction to Volume Twelve: Counting Our Blessings

Last year I was asked to discuss Charles Yu's *Interior Chinatown* at a local high school. When the issue of stereotypical film depictions of Asian Americans came up, one student suggested *Crazy Rich Asians*. I was a little surprised that that was the first one that came to mind, and I said, "Oh, you mean because it only depicts extremely wealthy people?" After a few more suggestions, another Asian American student pointed out that the first student was naming positive depictions, not the stereotypical ones of which Yu was reminding us. With so much more available to them, I wondered, do they really need to know about depictions in films such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* or *Sixteen Candles*, movies that were beloved by their parents and grandparents' generations and yet had painfully reductive depictions of Asian Americans? When are you educating and when are you complicit in the distribution of negative portrayals to a new generation who might otherwise be blissfully ignorant of them?

In the introduction to our last volume of *AALDP*, "Reading, Writing, and Teaching in the Whirlwind," I wrote about the many issues that we are collectively facing as teachers and readers of Asian American Literature, including Covid-inspired anti-Asian violence and political attacks on race as a topic for academic analysis. One impact of the various national and international crises we have been dealing with in the last few years has been on the mental health of our students. As both a university teacher and the mother of a new college student, mental health and motivation have become top of mind as I design my classes. So much of what educators do is essentially preparing our students for the future and if our focus is on the negatives, we risk sapping our students of hope and motivation. With that in mind, I am vowing to spend time counting the blessings of all that is going right in the world. The fact that a group of smart, mostly Asian American teenagers can easily come up with a number of positive and memorable portrayals of Asian Americans—and has trouble thinking of negative ones—is one such blessing.

We cannot simply depict wholly positive futures or imply that our students and children will not face struggle. Whether as a parent or as a teacher, I wish for those I foster to be incredibly knowledgeable about and adaptable to whatever hardship that may come their way without, if possible, ever having firsthand knowledge of hardship. But how can you have both? This conundrum has made me think more about what I value about literature: it allows us to enter both real and fictional lives and learn from them, creating empathy and understanding without necessarily requiring readers to go through a similar level of suffering.

This past fall I was set to teach a class in Asian American Literature, my first such class in several years. With countless new films and series centering on Asian American characters having been greenlit since the critical and economic triumphs of *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Minari*, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, I decided to theme my text selections around texts

that have been or are about to be made into films and series, such as *Crying in H Mart* and *The Sympathizer*. With just a short time before the fall semester began, I found out my colleague who teaches our American Film and Literature course would have to take the semester off due to a family emergency. As department chair I am also in charge of staffing and enrollments. Since her class overlapped the content of mine and had a higher maximum enrollment, I cancelled my own class and asked my students to join the Film and Literature course. I themed the course around migrations and combined part of the content of the Asian American lit class with texts such as Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* and the 1922 film Yezierska wrote, *Hungry Hearts*, as well as text and film versions of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, so that we examined major internal migrations such as the African American Great Migration, the Dust Bowl-era migration to the West, and various depictions of international migration over the course of the last two centuries. A unit on the origins of the Vietnamese diaspora included Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, Andrew Lam's "Grandma's Tales," and the Bui brothers' film *Green Dragon*. I also included an excerpt from Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, Carlos Bulosan, and two stories by Jhumpa Lahiri. As Hua Hsu was giving a reading at my campus, I assigned his Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir, *Stay True*. Thus, I ended up with three Asian American Pulitzer Prize-winning authors in one class and many works by authors who had once lived in or wrote about the same country as my students: Bulosan, Hsu, Lam, Nguyen, Steinbeck, and the Bui brothers. All of the texts together really emphasized the abundance of stories now available as well as shared themes across a variety of eras and ethnicities. Ending our semester with a discussion of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* made this point further as the film centers its plot on a struggle between two worldviews: one character seeing all of the complexity of the world—or the multiverse in this case—in a nihilistic perspective in which "nothing matters" and the other character eventually coming to interpret "nothing matters" to mean that nothing else *but* our relationships, our love for one another, matters. Daniel Kim and Daniel Scheinert's film shows in its very structure how experiencing a range of narratives about people with a variety of experiences can help us to understand and empathize with others and to ultimately see our own struggles in context with those around us. It interprets our current culture, in which we are inundated with all kinds of imagery and "information," not just as chaos, but also as plentitude.

*Everything Everywhere All at Once* also centers its plot on the mental health of young adult Joy Wang. A recent presentation given by the Division of Student Affairs and Success at UC Santa Cruz noted that requests for psychological counseling among their students had nearly doubled since before the pandemic, which seems roughly consistent with anecdotal information I receive as a department chair and professor at San José State. But they also pointed out that in a survey of both incoming students and parents, only about a quarter of students believe that there is a stigma to seeking help for mental health issues as compared to their parents' generation. The increase in mental health issues is very real. I have been teaching

for more than three decades and chair for six, and until this semester, I had never had to respond to the suicide of a student before. My sincere hope is that the greater consciousness of the need for mental health support can save others.

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We begin this volume with an interview of Shirley Geok-lin Lim, which took place in September 2022 on the occasion of her being a guest of SJSU's Center for Literary Arts and reading from her latest book of poems, *In Praise of Limes*. She has been so productive in recent years that she has yet another book coming out next month, *Dawns Tomorrow*. Her interview includes her poem, "Things That Make Me Happy," which includes both one of the most positive and one of the most chilling lines I have read in a poem.

The first article in this volume is Catherine Irwin's "'Loving you no matter what you do': Ai's Dramatic Monologues, 1970s Asian American Feminisms, and Reproductive Justice." Polling has shown that many students are choosing where they go to college based on the reproductive rights available in that state. Irwin's examination of the depiction of abortion in Ai's poetry of the 1970s makes Ai's work extremely relevant to readers today and gives us an insight into the history of intersectional activism.

In "David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face*: Fictional Autoethnography and a Parody on Racialization," Quan Manh Ha and J. M. Christiansen examine Hwang's inventive experimentation with genre to produce a play that depicts the complicated nature of racialization, not only for his characters, but for the playwright himself. Their essay shows how Hwang built on his experience with the controversy over the casting of *Miss Saigon* and his own play, *Face Value*, to form a layered commentary on the nature of representation and the stereotypes with which Asian Americans must still contend.

Next is a piece by Thomas Sarmiento, "Course Design as Critical Creativity: Intersectional, Regional, and Demographic Approaches to Teaching Asian American Literatures." *AALDP* was founded in order to explore the practice of *teaching* Asian American literatures, and Sarmiento's essay does just that by exploring how we frame and contextualize our syllabi and our pedagogy as part of a creative and critical process. They provide a window into their own pedagogy, which presents students with a range of genres, locales, and intersectional identities, giving special focus to texts such as the YA graphic novel *Flamer* by Mike Curato.

Elizabeth Lawrence, in "The Modular Fiction of Ken Liu," examines Liu's speculative fiction, exploring parallels between Liu's work as a literary author and as an engineer. She also places his work in the context of the long history of Chinese artistic uses of modules, critiquing the often essentialized way in which this author's content is read, but finding more universal forms and processes in his work. By looking at Liu's work as a kind of engineering, Lawrence is reversing the definitions used by Claude Levi-Strauss and so many structuralists and post-structuralists. Here the engineer rather than the bricoleur reuses materials, but the originality comes from how the materials are reformed to create new narratives.

The last three articles are by students or recent students. Jian Zhu examines the depiction of the US war in Vietnam in “Memory, Politics, and Literary Imagination in Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Refugees*.” He explores how national constructions of memory are depicted in Nguyen’s stories.

Leina Hsu wrote “Monstrous Matrilineage” when she was still an undergraduate at Georgetown University. Hers is the first essay by an undergraduate AALDP has ever accepted. Reviewers noted that the essay “invites the reader to respond to the literature with not just an academic lens but also a personal lens, which is after all how and why literature and art move us.” It explores three major Chinese American novels (*The Joy Luck Club*, *Bone*, and *Severance*) and their depiction of matrilineal lines of trauma and resistance.

In “Re-visions: Examining Narratives of Asian American Mental Health,” Kenji Aoki notes that suicide is the leading cause of death among Asian American young adults. And yet the common narrative of Asian Americans, especially as students, is one of resilience. I can attest to that from my own experience at a school where Asian Americans make up the largest single racial group and yet our Center for Asian Pacific Islander Student Empowerment (CAPISE) was founded only in the last few years. Aoki does an excellent job of applying literary skills to narratives of mental health to analyze tropes of resilience.

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---Noelle Brada-Williams,  
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