



Viet Thanh Nguyen. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 240 pp. \$150.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-514699-8.

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In 2002, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* made a bracing claim for the viability of the "ethnic entrepreneur"--the figure of accommodation scuttled by Asian American intellectuals, whose preference for the resistant "bad subject" had become settled doctrine. Nguyen's indictment of this ideological consensus sought to explore flexible strategies for articulating and indeed capitalizing on ethnic difference, and, further, to find something positive in such efforts: in his words, "Asian American intellectuals have not seriously explored *either* the reality that Asian American identity is a commodity *or* the positive possibilities that such commodification enables" (p. 10). In addition to exposing the limits of intellectual dogma, Nguyen's critical framework uncovered nodal points between Asian American and American studies to peer ahead to a time when Asian America would be fully assimilated into American pluralism--and his study ultimately positioned itself as intellectual girding for this future.

Fourteen years on, in our present nativist climate, critiquing neoliberal policies of multiculturalism can almost feel like a luxury. And penned as we are in the corporate university, entrepreneurship can even seem daring--not only on the part of the minority subjects we interrogate, but for our own intellectual operations. It may be going too

far to suggest that scholars may now be longing for the commodified ethnic identities whose eschewal Nguyen decried in 2002, but far-right efforts to dismantle multiculturalism threaten to derail the progression of Asian America onto the broader contours of the America. Of course, what scholars then lamented as neoliberal cooptation has, in significant part, come to pass--but the fever of racism, protectionism, and Islamophobia today reminds us all over again how thin a veneer liberalism can be, even as it stretches across newly globalized expanses. This age demands that we comprehend both the flexible strategies of ethnic identification that Nguyen elaborated and the foundational resistance of the Asian American movement that rejected such efforts in favor of a racial formation. It is worth noting that in the middle of the book Nguyen in fact reads the resistant "bad subject" as itself an instance of ethnic entrepreneurship, thus destabilizing the distinction that is his first premise; perhaps what we are grappling with now--and grappled with then--is the inseparability of ethnicity from race and vice versa. Resistance has always been threatened by impurities of commodification, and every ethnic entrepreneur has at some point been checked by the hard limit of racism.

Race and Resistance explores literary representations of Asian American bodies as key modes

of registering such realities, and its readings work through complex maneuvers of ethnic articulation in a set of texts that map the span of the Asian American literary canon, from the first fictions at the turn of the twentieth century to the controversy surrounding Lois-Ann Yamanaka's novel *Blu's Hanging* (1997) a century later. Nguyen opens and closes with this crisis, which roiled the Association for Asian American Studies (the selection of this novel for the association's annual literary award was met by outrage on the part of members who found its depiction of Filipinos racist), as exhibit A for the ideological straits of resistance and the absorption of Asian America into multicultural America. That this crisis revealed in miniature the broader agon of idealized resistance in a neoliberal age exposed intellectual straits as well, and Nguyen built upon an emergent call within the field for more capacious intellectual work. What was marked by Nguyen then as a relative paucity of theorization in Asian American studies--and literary study in particular, which was bound to the idealized political terms of the movement era--has now been, if anything, overcorrected: since 2002, the field has been shaped by a tropological theorization of Asian America's missing subject and a materialist account of a defining commodity form for Asiatic bodies in the United States, and it has staked the forefront of the broader transnational turn in American studies by elaborating transpacific routes, ruptures, and alliances.[1] Twenty-first-century Asian American scholarship thus demonstrates how ripe this field has been for theorizing well beyond the reactive formation of the movement era.

Beginning his readings with the recovered origins of the literary canon, Nguyen opens with the Eaton sisters as exemplars of the black-and-white ideology he critiques: virtuous Edith (who took on the cause of the despised Chinese in the United States) and repugnant Winnifred (who fabricated Japanese Madame Butterfly romances), mixed-race writers who chose resistant and ac-

commodationist paths. It is Nguyen's claim that, like Edith's laudable Sui Sin Far, Winnifred's Ono to Watanna was herself a trailblazer: it was no less an effort to become a popular Japanese novelist, and Nguyen issues, too, a salient warning against attempts to recuperate Winnifred within the terms of resistance reserved for her struggling sister. That both sisters operated within a landscape far distant from the intellectual judgments that would mark them a century later is an obvious fact that Nguyen's analysis turns into a compelling truth. This remarkable pairing has always felt tailor-made for Asian American studies, but it was Nguyen's chapter that definitively marked out the problematics of the ideological spectrum with which scholars have freighted these two writers. The author pairings of subsequent chapters do not as readily map onto this range (and indeed few could, with the exception of the feuding couple of Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston, which Nguyen significantly does not engage as a primary contest), and, considered today, Nguyen's choices are surprising: it is curious to read Gus Lee alongside Frank Chin, Ninotchka Rosca with Jessica Hagedorn--and in both cases the now-forgotten works frame the readings of the canonical ones. Nevertheless, both result in critical payoffs: in the case of the Chinese American writers (despite a rift in periodization between them), enshrining violence creates a link between Asian American and American studies, while the Filipino writers suggest modes of independence separate from Western models of liberation. Asian American narratives set in spaces outside the United States provide especially rich cases for Nguyen, and his reading of Carlos Bulosan (who is interestingly paired with John Okada) notably features the realization of Bulosan's intertwined political and romantic desires--thwarted in *America is in the Heart* (1973)--in *The Cry and the Dedication* (1995), critically set in the Philippines. Strikingly, flexible strategies of accommodation seem to approach liberatory potential in scenes outside of the US.

One chapter features a single author, Vietnamese American memoirist and humanitarian Le Ly Hayslip, and this material is closest to Nguyen's subsequent creative and scholarly writing. Nguyen's compelling reading of the compromises and possibilities of Hayslip's self-presentation as a victim of the war renders this Asian American subject an ethnic entrepreneur *par excellence*. The chapter is particularly fine in positioning Hayslip within the late capitalist moment of flexible accumulation, and Nguyen is attuned to both her significant demands and the problematic assumptions that also weaken her enterprising connections. I see the kernel of Nguyen's major work to come in his attention to Hayslip's strategies for positioning herself within the overseas Vietnamese community: in contrast to the outward gazes Nguyen presents throughout *Race and Resistance*--whether the isomorphism between Asian America and American multiculturalism, or the exploration of flexible strategies enacted outside of the United States--his consideration of Hayslip's reception within her diasporic community burrows inward to unveil explanatory structures bound to cultural and political assumptions that are revelatory in an entirely different way. The entrepreneurial resources made visible through this focus describe flexible strategies that are neither bound to broader American formations nor to anti-imperialist critique; though they are inseparable from these powerful forces, Nguyen presents identificatory models that circulate the globe via often-unseen terms--and, significantly, touch down in sites long overlooked in Asian American critical work and creative expression.

Note

[1]. Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); and Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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