

MAKING SENSE  
OF SCREAMING

A MONKEY'S COMPANION

## MAKING SENSE OF SCREAMING: A MONKEY'S COMPANION

*"She's great. She's like a friend."  
"I see that. She lets you cook and guard the cars."*

—David Wong Louie (pg. 303)

*servility made him sinister  
his buck teeth were glowing mirrors  
and he shined his shit at me  
hoping i'd see myself and quiver*

—Dennis Sangmin Kim (pg. 314)

You've just completed reading—or reading around in—*Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images*. You probably enjoyed some pieces, laughed out loud, or learned something new. Other works might have left you angry or defensive, wanting to start an argument. In any case, these pieces might provoke you to pose questions that you might not have considered or investigate histories that you did not previously know about. Now what? How do you make sense of the whole from reading these fragments of what could be called the “Asian American experience”? Is there such a thing? All of these pieces are produced out of such diverse viewpoints, what do they total up to be? Beyond the individual perspective of each author, what can be taken away?

What follows is intended to help you construct a bigger picture to frame your reading. It poses more questions than it provides neat summaries: it asks you to debate the authors, to take them on, to investigate their meanings. It includes “found” quotations that are meant to inspire, provoke, or amuse. In some cases, it pushes you to seek other avenues of inquiry beyond this printed page.

*Don't blame me for racism, that stuff happened a long time ago, and anyway, I can't be racist! My girlfriend is white and so are some of my best friends and servants!*

—Thien-Bao Thuc Phi (pg. 154)

### **Thin-skinned . . . and That's a Compliment**

This anthology takes its title from a restaurant review in which an Amerasian boy is called a “rambunctious little monkey.” When confronted with community charges of racism, the editor of *Milwaukee Magazine* prints a weak apology setting off a storm of letters and e-mails, some of which are reprinted in this volume. And now,

**The Top Ten list of Obvious Objections to this example:**

10. What's the big deal? It's a restaurant review for chrissake.
9. The storeowner was not offended. Why should you be?
8. The only offense in this review is bad writing.
7. The author of the review did not **intend** to disparage Filipinos.
6. To me, all kids are monkeys. I like monkeys.
5. That review was complimentary; after all, she *praised* the food.
4. Some people are just overly sensitive. This is just overreacting.
3. There are certainly more important things to protest.
2. Some of my best friends are Chinese food.

The number one response from the Top Ten list of Obvious Objections:

1. **If we had to watch our language all the time, we'd never say anything.**

Now, this volume exists in defiance of this Top Ten list; it came into being to counter both the petty ignorances and the larger histories of oppression that Asians face in the u.s. It indicates different screaming thresholds, some activated by incidents like Wen Ho Lee's arrest, and others in which the seemingly banal—a restaurant review, a billboard, an article in *Newsweek*—indicates larger cultural anxieties about Asian Americans. Do the pieces in this volume successfully counter the sentiments expressed in this Top Ten list? Do they make urgent, immediate, and significant the grievances detailed in these pages? Can these objections be applied to other instances in which Asian American authors analyze the social implications of culture, for example, Sunaina Maira's point that marketing trends appropriating Asian culture are fetishistic and exploitative?

No doubt some might refuse to see Madonna's channeling her inner geisha to be implicitly racist. Does this resistance arise from the belief that Asians do not suffer from racial oppression? Perhaps part of the answer is that positing difference is never neutral; difference will always be placed in an evaluative hierarchy. This leads to the following discussion . . .

*I can't be a Filipino. I don't want to be a Filipino because the only Filipino everyone knows is the Filipino that eats dogs or the Filipino that walks around with a broom in his hands.*

—R. Zamora Linmark (pg. 322)

*Colonization of the imagination is a two-way street.*

—Jessica Hagedorn (pg. 210)

### **Dogeaters Alla Same: Cultural Relativism**

At a dinner party, a guest discoursing on her son's trip to China took the time to inform me that the Chinese eat dogs. This is, as can be imagined, a loaded thing to say to a Chinese American. Upon taking the look on my face as a sign of incredulity, she pressed her point: "The Chinese really do eat dogs."

ok, so the Chinese eat dogs. I accept this as a fact. But was it only information being exchanged at that moment? After all, the French eat horses, don't they? But we don't conjure up this image—eater of horse flesh—when we think, "French."

The trope of the dogeater—like that of the monkey—is a historically laden image. As Catherine Ceniza Choy, R. Zamora Linmark, and Dindo Llana and others in this volume attest, the image portrays Asians not merely as culturally different but as barbaric, backward, pre-modern.

What is at stake in describing Asian culture or Asians as different from what one takes to be the norm?

A more complicated question concerns the issue of cultural relativism embedded within any discussion of representation. "Dogeater" is a stereotype, by which one implies that it is a false perception. But if the image of the dogeater—or for that matter, the monkey, the geek, the model minority, the Lotus Blossom—were dispelled, would the truth about Asian Americans then emerge? The image of Asian Americans as alien, FOBs, or perpetual foreigners poses a more pressing question. Such portrayals deny Asian American participation in the public sphere as full citizens—the headline, "American Beats Out Kwan" in this volume is a case in point. Nevertheless, one cannot merely repudiate Asian "foreignness" as simple stereotype because doing so might ignore the significance of immigration policy, ESL initiatives, or theories of flexible citizenship—all addressed to "foreigners"—for Asian Americans as a group.

What are the politics embedded within any cultural comparison? Consider, for example, Arthur Sze's poem, "In Your Honor." Its dominant image is that of a fish being sliced alive at the table. Delicacy or cruelty? "Stereotype" or neutral fact of Asian cultural practice? Consider, too, Gish Jen's "Chin," which witnesses, in faux naïf fashion, a child's beating. Necessary discipline or child abuse? Confirmation of harsh Asian parenting? Or important spotlight on one form of social injustice? How do the pieces in this volume depict cultural comparisons that force us to come to ethical or political judgments that reflect our own cultural locations?

*jackie kicks the bad  
guy's ass sets the vase  
back on its rosewood  
stand in the next*

*shot a stray  
bullet smashes  
it into a thousand pieces*

—Lori Tsang (pg. 250)

### **Hello Kitty, and What do You Have to Do with Asian America?**

In writing about the trend of Indo-chic—examples of which can be found in this volume—Sunaina Maira writes, “Cultural appropriation of Asian artifacts and images is always a charged issue, because it is the tip of the deeper coagulation of histories of anti-Asian racism, anxieties about changing demographics, and exploitation of cheap Third World labor, the turn-of-the-millennium version of Orientalization” (pg. 229). For her, this American re-circulation of Asian images goes hand in hand with other forms of exploitation, both mutually enforcing and producing them. Popular culture is a medium of social control intrinsically connected to the maintenance of a status quo that includes hierarchies based on race and class.

“So,” asks Maira, “what kinds of representations do we, and can we, construct in response?” The answer is partly to be found in this volume. It is not only that American commodity culture appropriates and abstracts Asian culture, the reverse is also true: references to American popular culture abound in the work of these Asian American authors and the “found” images selected by the editors. In wresting these cultural references away from their contexts, the writers force new meanings upon them, produce alternative interpretations.

Consider the following:

**Pluto**

**Hello Kitty**

**Bruce Lee**

**Dixie cups**

**Midas muffler**

**Princess Amidala**

**Miss Saigon**

In taking on popular culture in their art, Asian Americans are not merely consumers of commodity culture, but producers of alternative signs. How are these icons perceived in American culture? How do they resonate for Asian Americans? How are they revised in this volume and for what reason?

*How, for instance, does race factor in attraction? A popular answer says love sees no color.*

*I don't believe that. We're taught to see race early on. The culture teaches us a racial hierarchy even before we're conscious of being taught.*

—David Mura (pg. 297)

*Pinkerton looking for Butterfly to suck my Suzie Wong.*

—Timothy Liu (pg. 330)

### **Becoming Visible: Is it *Enough*?**

#### **Some questions about the limits of liberal multiculturalism**

From this anthology, you learn that Asian Americans invented the nectarine in 1921.

Okay.

I forgot to tell my niece that piece of info. She's doing a report for school and has a budding social consciousness, the same kind of consciousness that provoked Helen Zia to seek out original scholarship in Asian American Studies that documented "our lost history." She sought and found stories that gave "faces and names to Asian American pioneers, and . . . place[d] them in history books with George Washington, Columbus, and the *Mayflower*" (pg. 98). Like Zia, my niece's teacher wants to know,

#### **Q: What contributions did Asians bring to American society?**

Certainly there is value in bringing a repressed history to light, as Zia notes, value in finally uncovering those "dramatic moments in the nation's history with Asian Americans at center stage." Before, there was only erasure and invisibility.

There was a time in which any Asian representation in American popular culture, however perverted, was cause for celebration. As Jessica Hagedorn writes about white actors portraying Asians in film, "Back then, not many thought to ask why [whites in yellowface]; they were all too busy being grateful to see anyone in the movies remotely like themselves" (pg. 204). It's true. My dad used to call us to come look at the tv when he thought he saw an "Oriental" (for some reason, usually a *Solid Gold* dancer). This would cause us all to run in and take a look. My mother would then scoff, more often than not, "Dad thinks a *black* girl is Oriental." I don't think he was exactly grateful for the representation, I think he just enjoyed looking at the girls. Allan Issac diagnoses this desire to see oneself somewhere in America as the source of his fascination with Andrew Cunanan: "Perhaps, my perverse compulsion stemmed from a longing to be reflected in the small screen in

this American media sensation. Filipinos would in some manner be part of an American drama. Any American drama” (pg. 87). If African Americans have O.J., we could have at least *one* killer, dang it.

This anthology raises a broader question about representing ethnic experience in the U.S. We want to see ourselves in culture—but does that change anything? Does it make a difference? One could say that these pieces contribute to the project of making visible what was once repressed and marginalized. They shed light not only on contributions that Asians have made here, but on the very ways in which our history is that of the nation and its involvement in global processes—from American imperial endeavors at the turn of the century and those leading up to the Cold War, to the suspension of civil liberties upon the incarceration of Japanese Americans, to American claims to be an immigrant nation. M. Evelina Galang begins the volume with this leap of faith: “What if Ann Christenson had studied the history of the first wave of Filipino U.S. nationals? What if her editors at *Milwaukee Magazine* had been as familiar with the history of Asian immigrants in America as they are with the history of immigrants on the *Mayflower*? Someone would have seen the mistake, caught it, erased it, and never let it see the printed page” (pg. 5–6). *Knowing*, she implies, stops racism before it happens. It kills bugs dead.

This belief is foundational to the Asian American Movement that spawned the scholarship Zia discovered in college. Nevertheless, it prompts a critical question about how this aim might have been co-opted once “diversity” became a catch-word in American national self-conception. Vijay Prashad notes that American racial representation in the post-Civil Rights era is dominated—and contained—by the logic of liberal multiculturalism:

The anti-racist struggle . . . fought against the arrogance of white supremacy, but the United States’ response to the struggle was simply to adopt the liberal patina of multiculturalism to fend off the challenge. Despite multiculturalism’s roots in anti-racism, it now seems to be restricted to the promotion of an ahistorical diversity and the pedagogy of sensitivity. (pg. 257)

One could say that the very presence of anthologies like this one unwittingly contributes to that “liberal patina of multiculturalism.” *Screaming Monkeys* gives voice to a “primal scream” that attests to Asian American presence and anger, but is it merely content to render visible what was previously invisible? Does it do more—if so, what? Can it transcend the moment of its own emergence?

### Open-ended Questions:

If acknowledgement of marginalized populations is the goal of multiculturalism, then anthologies like this one function as its horizon; they make it possible to have access to diversity at any Barnes & Noble. Does the very existence of the multicultural anthology become a sign of social progress? Or is it merely a superficial indication of change that substitutes for more meaningful social transformation? Can one abstract the existence of such an anthology, its physical presence and the historical circumstances that bring it into being, from its content?

What would a rigorous concept of multiculturalism look like? Do any pieces in this volume suggest avenues of radical, systemic critique?

### A: The nectarine was invented in the U.S. by two Koreans in 1921.

This is immensely important.

Or not.

*danang danang danang  
to do the abacus arithmetic  
on the other side of the black granite*

—Marlon Unas Esguerra (pg. 411)

### The Other Side of Black Granite: America's Repressed Colonial History

In leading us behind the Vietnam War Memorial, Marlon Unas Esguerra leads us to the obscured history of American imperialism. As a number of authors here note, this legacy reflects “historical amnesia about America’s violent imperialism” (pg. 37), a willful incomprehension of a past that is “everywhere and nowhere.” (pg. 90).

Why the repression of imperial history, in particular to the concerns of this volume, the history of American annexation of the Philippines? At one level, it is clear that democracy is antithetical to colonialism; military control is seen as incommensurate with representative democratic politics. In regard to this history, the acute parallel may not be to other Asian groups in the U.S. but to Native Americans. How, for example, do depictions of Filipino savagery or innocence addressed here reflect portrayals of the Indian? How is the language of paternalism or conquest similar?

*Screaming Monkeys* forces us to consider how American involvement overseas has affected Asian American representation. Often, the only trace of that repressed history exists in those displaced populations—war brides, refugees, migrant labor, domestic workers sending money home, retired servicemen—whose presence is a direct result of imperialism and who thereby figure ambivalently in national memory. As students of American history



discover the other side of black granite, how does our national self-conception change? How does Asian American literature pull us to that place?

### **Literary Interpretation as Historical Interpretation**

Literary and historical interpretation are not dichotomous acts. Knowing history becomes key to interpreting a number of pieces in this anthology. For example, Ricco Villanueva Siasoco's "The Rules of the Game" depicts a conflict over a game of mah-jongg between Filipinos and their white boss: how is it resolved and why? How do the histories of Philippine conquest and the Filipino diaspora influence your reading? By the same token, in Hisaye Yamamoto's "Wilshire Bus," we learn in an aside that Esther has just returned to Los Angeles after being released from a concentration camp in Arkansas. How does this explain her reaction to the incident on the bus? Is knowledge of Japanese American internment necessary for a full understanding of the story?

### **For Further Research Google This**

- comfort women
- Bataan Death March
- Heart Mountain, Wyoming
- Wen Ho Lee
- Vincent Chin
- Executive Order 9066
- United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*
- Chinese Exclusion Act
- Los Angeles Riots or Los Angeles Rebellion
- Maya Lin
- Corregidor
- Gentleman's Agreement, 1907
- Philippine Insurrection or Philippine American War

*[Our] common oppression should be the basis of sympathy and solidarity, yet it often inspires the opposite: superhuman attempts to differentiate ourselves—the good, assimilated, upwardly mobile Asians—from those undesirable and unruly Others.*

—Lynn Lu (pg. 267)

### **Ambivalent Assimilation, or Can Two Wongs Make a White?**

A number of authors in this anthology present views of assimilation that are marked by ambivalence. That is, it is unclear whether or not increasing acculturation is a positive thing. On one hand, authors inscribe characters or speakers who are apparently eager to win acceptance and entry into

American society and who view the loss of ethnic culture as a fair trade for Americanization. On the other hand, they may also represent this process as fraught with violence or ultimately impossible for people of color. How do any of these texts provide contrasting representations of assimilation?

Geeta Kothari's "Meena's Curse" (pg. 214)

Bienvenidos Santos's "The Day the Dancers Came" (pg. 126)

Robbi Sethi's "Fifty-Fifty" (pg. 181)

Thaddeus Rutkowski's "White and Wong" (pg. 142)

*How could we write poetry in a time like this?*

—Marilyn Chin (pg. 192)

### The Ultimate Test

*The ability to make the connection between the injustice we have faced as Asian Americans and the injustice that others face is the ultimate test . . . I believe our Asian-American coalition will live or die by our choice in that regard.*

—Mari Matsuda (pg. 160)

Asian American identity is a coalitional one: we come together as Asian Americans not because we have "natural" racial affinities, but because we share a common and continuing history in the U.S. This volume stands in testimony to that commonality, for better or worse, a commonality based on threats of violence and acts of exclusion as well as fellowship and solidarity. Marlon Unas Esguerra leads us angrily, lyrically, behind the Vietnam War Memorial forcing us to acknowledge what is not inscribed there, "the names of *my* people," the Vietnamese who likewise died in battle (emphasis mine). I don't know whether Marlon Unas Esguerra is Vietnamese or not. To paraphrase Thaddeus Rutkowski in this volume, no matter, you get the picture.

These testimonies of Asian solidarity—seeing oneself in the fate of others and acting upon it—are not limited by an affinity based solely on race. If we accept what Matsuda recognizes as the desire for justice underlying something called "Asian America" then there are no boundaries to conceiving alternative affinities, no claims of unity based on simple likeness.

The writers in this volume have re-imagined the sometimes tenuous, sometimes expedient bonds that link people. An airplane flight becomes the occasion for one such ephemeral community:

*We are on an island. Suspended above the clouds, we are a nation of our own. We can forget who we are, where we come from and where we are going until we get there.* (pg. 224)

So writes S.L. Kim. The passengers' commonality is only fleeting—the duration of one flight—and fragile, held together only by the hull of machinery. They share one identity: the fact of being a passenger on this one flight, at this one time, might be the only identity that matters. 9/11 has shown us how truly this image can resonate. “[W]e are a nation,” but national unity is only one means of imagining some shared collectivity.

Writers in this anthology have focused on global linkages between working class peoples, Asian or no, who occupy similar positions within the processes of global capital. Sonia Shah, for example, suggests that “attempting to understand our place in the world” is the only way that Asian American awareness can “[step] outside the narrow confines of identity politics” to become “something much broader and long lasting” (pg. 277). To that end, she links the West’s reliance on exploitable Asian labor to be the most significant cause of anti-Asian bias. Bino A. Realuyo’s poem invoking Flor Contemplacion and Sarah Balabagan, Filipina maids accused of crimes while working abroad, draws a connection between Filipino diasporas. Tara Agtarap’s “A Lavender Army” questions commodified notions of femininity imported from the West and its relevance to Third World women. These concerns are all Asian concerns.

What other pieces inscribe coalition? How is coalition imagined beyond race and ethnicity?

As importantly, a number of authors inscribe ambivalent or missed opportunities for solidarity; they are attune to how corrections become denied whether due to shame, fear, or indifference. Where is it refused? In Hisaye Yamamoto’s “Wilshire Bus,” shared racial oppression is the cause of the characters’ repudiation of each other: an “I Am Korean” button greets the Japanese American narrator like a slap in the face, but it is only different in degree from her own detachment when she is faced with a white man’s diatribe against Chinese Americans. Similarly, while the granddaughter in M. Evelina Galang’s “Labandera” could show pride in her grandmother’s activism on behalf of comfort women, instead she experiences only shame and refuses to claim solidarity as a woman. Likewise, Abelmann and Lie’s treatment of the Los Angeles Riots highlights the competitive economic structure that governs Korean American and African American interaction in South Central L.A.

How does coalition figure in the following pieces? Does it presume likeness? What possibilities are affirmed or denied?

“Chin”

“Fifty-Fifty”

“Summer of Bruce”  
“The Price of Eggs in China”  
“Honor, 1946”

The authors, speakers, and characters in this anthology forge connections across multiple boundaries and for multiple reasons. Can we imagine political alliances that transcend a shared condition of social vulnerability, a common relation to social injury? Can we think of coalitions that articulate other forms of shared subjectivity?

*I believe the key defining element of Asian-American identity is the quest for justice.*

—Mari Matsuda (pg. 160)

—LESLIE BOW