

# The Pleasures of Not Being Lonely

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“An intimate lecture.” That was how Lawrence-Minh Davis, one of the intrepid, visionary curators of this festival, described in an email to me what he had in mind for today’s presentation. When I first saw that phrase, I laughed. I thought of “intimates,” as in the euphemism for women’s underwear. That I would be standing before you today clad in only my skivvies or that you, dear audience, would be required to attend in yours. Or, maybe, both. But then I saw the time for this lecture. Ten a.m. is clearly too early for such hijinks.

Then I thought about the other meaning of “intimate,” the one that is surely intended here: “intimate” as in a feeling or quality of closeness, engendered by trust, friendship, or love. And I laughed again. Because that connotation suggests that I should invite you up here, one by one, and whisper this lecture directly into your ear. Not because its content is full of secrets, meant for each of you, but because this lecture’s intent is to share with you what is tender, fragile, and true to me: a plainsong to the literature of Asian America and how and when voices therein have spoken directly to me, whispered themselves directly into my ear.

Let’s begin this way: Imagine that I am not standing in front of you but that I am seated by your side. Imagine that for *this* moment, the two of us are alone, which is not at all the same as being lonely, and I am saying, *sotto voce*, the following: *You and I may have never met, but I have been here for you, as you are here for me now.* Writer and reader, that is our intimate relationship, our trust, our friendship—our shared love for the literature of Asian America, this nation-state of our voices, full-throated and passionate, amid the raucous, multiphonic chorus that is American literature.

It is a pleasure to be in your company this morning. “Pleasure” is, in fact, the theme, the organizing principle, of this intimate lecture. In an environment of heightened anxiety and daily attacks upon the marginalized communities of this nation, I submit to you that pleasure is a radical state of being, a disruptive feeling to claim as our own. To gather here this morning, on this day, and to take pleasure in the literary traditions and the imaginative present-day of Asian America is to affirm that we and our creative labor belong here at the Library of Congress, belong here in Washington, D.C.; that we and our allied communities belong in all of the fifty states of this union and the territories of American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

What does “pleasure” mean, for this reader—because we are all readers first—of Asian American literature? It means opening a book and seeing for the first time the body—the Asian American body—and it means recognizing that body—that Asian American body. It means holding a mirror in my hands, when I have never seen my reflection before.

It was during my sophomore year at college that I began enrolling in Asian American Studies classes. Let me be clear, I began enrolling in the one class per semester that was being offered. In the years I was an undergraduate at Yale, from 1986 to 1990, that institution did not have a commitment to Asian American Studies, and there was no full-time faculty in this area. Instead, Yale, like many other universities, preferred to bring in and—again, let me be

clear—to exploit a rotating roster of adjunct instructors. These adjuncts, Grace Yun and Oscar Campomanes, were my intellectual lifelines. Without them, I would not be here today, as a reader, a writer, or anything else. Some of you may remember a song from the early eighties that began “Last night, a DJ saved my life.” Well, beginning in ’87, adjuncts saved mine.

Yun and Campomanes taught classes that introduced me to Asian American history and to Asian American writers of poetry, fiction, and plays. For those of you who are younger, I think it may be difficult to grasp how like unicorns—mythical creatures—Asian American writers were to me in 1987. I had never read one. I had never met one in life, nor had I seen their photographs. I want you to take that sentence in. Their literal bodies—in addition to their bodies of work—were unknown to me until I was nineteen years old.

Among the first books that I bought for an Asian American Studies class was *Breaking Silence: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets*, published in 1983. I remember flipping through its pages and fixating on the black-and-white photographs of the contributors that preceded their works. Forty-five of the forty-nine contributors had sent one in. Garrett Hongo, George Leong, and Wing Tek Lum did not, and Alan Chong Lau sent in a small potato-block print of a human figure.

The photographs varied, but most of them were not sleek author photographs, and pre-1983 was, of course, many years before the iPhone and the selfie, so another human being—most likely a friend—took those images. I took in every detail offered by these photographs, from the shapes of the poets’ faces, the length of their hair, to the items of clothing, and also whatever I could gather about the room or the setting where the poets had situated themselves.

On the pages of *Breaking Silence*, I saw for the first time a photograph of Jessica Hagedorn: her short, spiky hair, her off-the-shoulder blouse, her arms crossed in front of her chest, her cool-girl smirk. She looked back at me as if she was going to kick my ass if I didn’t love her *and* her poems. Now that I have met Hagedorn in person and consider her a friend, I know that was exactly what she meant to convey.

“Song for My Father”<sup>1</sup> was one of the poems that she had in *Breaking Silence*, and here is how it begins:

i arrive  
in the unbearable heat  
the sun's stillness  
stretching across  
the land's silence  
people staring out  
from airport cages  
thousands of miles  
later  
and i have not yet understood  
my obsession to return  
and twelve years  
is fast  
inside my brain  
exploding like tears  
i could show you  
but you already know.

Yes, Jessica Hagedorn, you were right. I did already know. About the obsession to return, about the unbearable heat, about the land's silence. But what I did not know and what I had rarely seen was the Asian American body, your body or mine, documented in this land.

Below each contributor's photograph was a short biographical statement. This was Hagedorn's: she "currently lives in New York City where she writes, performs in the theater, and leads her band, The Gangster Choir." There was more to the statement, but I did not need any more. She had me at New York City, writing, performing, and in a band. That was a life, a possible life that I had not even begun to map for myself, and there it was, being lived. There it was encapsulated in a succinct sentence that read to me like an epic poem.

*Breaking Silence* also introduced me to Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, her long hair parted down the middle, framing her elongated oval face, fresh and lit with the sun or some other source of light, which had landed softly on her right shoulder as well. Berssenbrugge's biographical statement was bursting with place names: Peking, China; Massachusetts; Alaska; New Mexico. The last line said that she was "currently living" in El Rito, New Mexico. To me, she seemed more nomadic than settled in any one place, and the adverb "currently" suggested that there could be a change in her locale at any moment—a sudden flight, a flash of wings. Again, here was another life, another possible life that in the years to come would become a template for how I wanted to be in the world.

On the pages of *Breaking Silence*, I saw for the first time photographs of Marilyn Chin, Kimiko Hahn, Joy Kogawa, Janice Mirikitani, Cathy Song, and Kitty Tsui, whose poems would become familiar and dear to me as I would continue to meet their works on the page in the years to come.

The pleasure of seeing the body, the Asian American body—as I have just described it—may sound too literal, too documentarian, and have little to do with literature per se. Maybe that's why Garrett Hongo, George Leong, Wing Tek Lum, and Alan Chong Lau did not submit photographs. I note, by the way, that all of the women poets contributed a photograph. (Now, *that* is a topic, in and of itself, worthy of a dissertation.)

To see the Asian American body—a reflection, a refraction, a near or distant relative of your own—in a photograph, on the page, on the screen, on the stage, or in the day-to-day world, for that matter, is the beginning of being able to imagine that body and your own body within a multitude of environs and possible lives. And *that* imagining was, for me, the beginning of writing the fiction of Asian America.

The pleasure of seeing and of recognizing the body cannot be devalued as something less than literature or separate from literature. The written word begins with the writer. The writer who lacks the occasion to see and to recognize her body is alone—as in profoundly lonely. She can write and create in that state, in that void—the imagination is resilient and will find for her other narrative vessels—but this lecture, remember, is about pleasure. And pleasure in the context of Asian American literature is about not being lonely.

Before we leave the pages of *Breaking Silence*, I want to share with you a poem by Yuri Kageyama, whose photograph in the anthology was a canvas of pitch black, with only her face, the waves of her hair, and a standing mic emerging from the darkness; her eyes are cast downward, focused on the instrument that is amplifying her voice. Her biographical statement identifies her as a "performer" who was born in Japan; grew up in Tokyo, Maryland, and Alabama; and now calls San Francisco her home. This poem is entitled "My Mother Takes a Bath,"<sup>2</sup> and the body is at its center. This is how it begins:

| My mother

Sits

In the round uterine

rippling green water

hazy vapor-gray dampness

soapy smelling

in the air—a circle cloud—above

the tub of a bath

the wet old wood

sending sweet stench

sometimes piercing to her nose and sometimes

swimming in the hot, hot water

tingling numb at the toes and fingertips

when she moves too quickly but

lukewarm caught in the folds of her white white belly

Her face is brown-spottled

beautiful with dewdrop beads of sweat lined neatly where

her forehead joins her black wavy tired hair

and above her brown-pink lips

one drop lazily hangs, droops over,

sticking teasingly to her wrinkle

then pling! falls gently

playfully disappears into the water

She sighs

And touches her temple  
high and naked  
runs her fingers over the lines deep  
Her hand  
has stiff knuckles  
enlarged joints crinkled and hardened  
but her thick nails thaw in the water and  
her hand is  
light  
against her face  
and gentle and knowing  
and the palm  
next to her bony thumb  
is soft  
Her breasts are blue-white clear  
with soft brown nipples that dance  
floating with the movements of the  
waves of the little ocean tub  
slowly, a step behind time, slowly  
She sighs again . . .

For me, the pleasure of recognizing a kindred body, a family of kindred bodies, was followed in quick succession by the pleasure of recognizing the kindred spirit. At the age of nineteen, when I thought of a kindred spirit I was already thinking of a kindred writer, the guild of wordsmiths that I most wanted to join.

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The literary form that I admired the most, and still do, is the short story, as like poetry it is dependent on concision and upon the economy of words, which is not the same as the parsimony of words. In Oscar Campomanes's Asian American Literature class, I read for the first time "Yoneko's Earthquake," by Hisaye Yamamoto. It is a short story that has stayed with me, instructing me in terms of substance and craft, every time that I have reread it.

Perhaps because I was introduced to Asian American history and Asian American literature at the same time, at the same impressionable moment during the intellectual growth spurt of my youth, they are to me entwined forms of storytelling, sometimes complementary and oftentimes contradictory. Perhaps this is also why I have gravitated to historical fiction, that genre that is the hybrid of both.

But I am getting ahead of myself here. Before there could be the writing of fiction and certainly before the intent of writing historical fiction, there was the deep pleasure of reading fiction. In Yamamoto's short story, I met a writer who was a master of her craft, who used the long arc of history that this reader in 1987 possessed and what the characters in "Yoneko's Earthquake," set in 1933, do not possess. This long historical arc imbues each act and detail of this narrative with added significance and subtle, but devastating, weight.

Written in 1951 and set in California in 1933, "Yoneko's Earthquake" is, at its heart, about the earthquake to come. Executive Order 9066 was signed on February 19, 1942, authorizing the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The story is also about the resulting near-disintegration of the social fabric of the Japanese American community that followed. That metaphorical earthquake, caused by greed, hubris, and hatred, makes the literal earthquake experienced by ten-year-old Yoneko Hosoume and her family seem almost benign in comparison. The tectonic and emotional shifts within Yoneko's family are painful and irreparable, but that actual temblor is also a precursor for the wide-scale trauma and man-made destruction that are to come.

What Yamamoto's short story teaches me, then and now, is how to use history in order to create a double narrative—a double jeopardy for her characters. Listen, for example, to this brief excerpt and listen for how Yamamoto foreshadows the Executive Order, the internment, and the war—all vis-à-vis a single household item:

Marpo had put together a bulky table-size radio which brought in equal proportions of static and entertainment. He never got around to building a cabinet to house it and its innards of metal and glass remained public throughout its lifetime. This was just as well, for not a week passed without Marpo's deciding to solder one bit or another. Yoneko and Seigo became a part of the great listening audience with such fidelity that Mr. Hosoume began remarking the fact that they dwelt more with Marpo than with their own parents. He eventually took a serious view of the matter and bought the naked radio from Marpo, who thereupon put away his radio manuals and his soldering iron in the bottom of his steamer trunk and divided more time among his other interests.

Marpo is a young Filipino American farmhand who works on the Hosoume farm. He fascinates Yoneko as well as her mother, and it is the latter's attraction to Marpo and vice versa that, along with other events, precipitates a weakening of the foundation for this family. The radio, which Marpo has built, represents their interest in him, which Mr. Hosoume has noted with irritation and with jealousy. Mr. Hosoume, in turn, decides to acquire this object for his own. That radio takes on another layer of significance and foreboding when the reader considers the history that was to come: the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the days immediately following, when Japanese Americans were promptly deemed suspicious and traitorous for simply owning items such as a radio or a camera; how members of the Roosevelt administration, even prior to the signing of the Executive Order, had wanted to confiscate, without warrant, radios and cameras from Japanese Americans; and how Japanese Americans were subsequently forced to sell the majority of their household belongings, including their radios, when they could only take the essentials with them to the internment camps.

Marpo's radio, which then becomes Mr. Hosoume's radio, is the equivalent of a loaded gun or a knife. Yamamoto, a skilled builder of short stories, would not have introduced such a weapon without an implied threat or danger. What she teaches me, then and now, with that radio is the necessity of knowing Asian American history. Without it, the radio remains a radio. Without knowing Asian American history, I, the reader, would have had a lesser, only partial understanding of "Yoneko's Earthquake." It is important to note that Yamamoto's short story, devoid of any explicit foreshadowing or historical framing, does not aim to teach this history to the reader. That is Yamamoto's most important lesson: the literature of Asian America is not here to provide a service or to enlighten, functioning as a quasi-native guide or cheat sheet to history. The literature of Asian America is a participatory act. As a reader of it, you and I have to step up and do the work. That seems fair to me, then and now.

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In 1996, I was living in New York City. I had fulfilled that one component of the possible life that I had glimpsed in Hagedorn's biographical statement, but there was no pleasure whatsoever in the life I had created for myself. I had graduated from Columbia Law School

the year before and was working as a litigator in a law firm whose name I now often forget. I remember its joke name more often than its actual name, because the joke name is closer to the truth: Huge Cupboard of Greed.

Pleasure was a completely alien feeling to me.

I had become a stranger to writing, with not a word of fiction written since 1992, the year I entered law school. My body was rebelling against this stranger, threatening to shut itself down entirely. I had a facial tic, one of my shoulders was raised higher than the other and frozen in place by stress, and I was having nightmares in which I was fighting—as in trying to punch the law-firm partners for whom I worked—but the momentum of my arm would slow to a standstill as I got close to the face, and my fist never managed to make contact with the skin or skull. In the mornings, I would put on the mask of unquestionable competency and wear the “thick skin” demanded by a corporate law firm, a space where I was assumed to be a secretary on more than one occasion. As for my spirit, it had gone nearly dormant, retreating deep inside the failing body, hoping to find there safety from the daily onslaught of toxic testosterone levels, from the bruising egos, and from the grotesque flexing and posturing of an unchecked hierarchy.

Whenever I could, I sought refuge in Asian American literature, which in New York City occupied a physical space, the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, located then in the East Village on St. Mark’s Place, in a basement below a GAP clothing store. The Workshop had low ceilings, no windows, and questionable wall-to-wall carpeting. It hosted readings that were literally hot. You were going to sweat because of the incendiary words and because of the lack of circulating air. In that space, in that literal underground, I would hear and meet in person the poets Jessica Hagedorn, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, and Kimiko Hahn. I would also meet writers who were in their twenties like me but who did not have facial twitches or frozen shoulders.

One evening in 1996, I remember leaving work early, which meant I had already sealed my fate of never becoming a partner at that law firm, and going to a poetry reading at the Workshop. I knew nothing of the poet’s work. I only knew from her last name that Barbara Tran was Vietnamese American.

In ‘96, a Vietnamese American writer was still a unicorn among unicorns. I had sought out and read all the voices that I could find. The linguist and literary scholar Huỳnh Sanh Thông, the theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, the journalist and memoirist Nguyen Qui Duc, memoirist Jade Ngọc Hoàng Huỳnh, Vietnamese Canadian poet Thuong Vuong-Riddick, and journalist and short-story writer Andrew Lam, who in 1995 had co-edited the first Vietnamese American anthology, *Once Upon a Dream*, which I had not yet found a copy of.

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When I say unicorns among unicorns, I want you to know that I had a clear idea of the landscape in which Vietnamese American writers could—or rather could not—be found.

In 1990, I had written my senior thesis on the emergence of Vietnamese American literature. I had focused on the earliest wave of Vietnamese voices in the U.S., beginning with 1975 and the refugee respondents who were interviewed by sociologists and other academic fact-gatherers. I analyzed how these refugee voices and stories were translated, grouped, and organized to further an agenda and a narrative intention that were not necessarily their own. My essay then focused on two works published in the 1980s by mainstream U.S. publishers, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) by Le Ly-Hayslip, co-written with Jay Wurts, and *Shallow Graves: Two Women and Vietnam* (1987) by Tran Thi Nga, co-written with Wendy Wilder Larsen. Those co-written memoirs, I argued, were examples of the continuing mediation of Vietnamese American voices and stories. My thesis essay was published in UCLA's *Amerasia Journal* in 1993.

I had read and studied the works of Vietnamese American writers. I had written and published about them, but I had never met a Vietnamese American writer until 1996, when I was twenty-eight years old. I want to let that sentence sink in as well.

Hearing Barbara Tran read her poems that night made me weep. I still cry every time that I hear her read her work aloud. It is something about the cadence of her voice, about her words so well chosen that they are iridescent as they float in the room; her subject matters are so near and dear to my own, yet clothed in other, more brilliant garments, her hybrid forms defying the lines drawn between poetry and prose. And, certainly, there is also the pleasure of seeing and of recognizing that standing before me is a Vietnamese American woman writer who was also born in 1968, a year of turmoil in the U.S. and South Vietnam. Tran's city of birth was New York and mine Saigon. Our families were equally nomadic but on a different timeline, our fathers charismatic and multilingual, our mothers inspiring us with their personal histories and day-to-day lives that differ so much from our own.

Listen to these two pieces that appear side by side in Barbara Tran's chapbook *In the Mynah Bird's Own Words*, which was published in 2002.<sup>3</sup>

*Rosary*

Do I begin at the here and now,

or does the story start

with the first time

my mother took the wheel—

the first woman to drive

in a country where men

are afraid to walk?

My mother's story begins

when the steam rises.

It ends when it's ready.

Taste it. Does it need more salt?

On the facing page, Tran placed a prose poem that is so tightly constructed that it astounds me with each rereading. Here is "heat":

*heat*

Today, at 67, she stands at the stove at work. The heat overcomes her. She thinks she is standing at the shore. The steam is like a warm breeze being carried out to the sea. My mother hears the seagulls circling above. She feels the sun on her skin and admires the reflection on all the shining fish bodies. Her father's men have been collecting the nets for days now, laying the fish out for fermenting. The gull with the pure white underside swoops toward the fish farthest away, lands on an overturned boat, its sides beaten and worn, its bottom sunburned like a toddler's face after her first day of work in the rice fields. Beside the boat, a palm hut, where the fishermen hang their shirts, where their wives change when it's time for a break from the scooping and jarring, when their black pants become hot as the sand itself. And then the laughter starts, and the women's bodies uncurl from their stooped positions, their pointed hats falling back, the men treading anxiously in the water as they imagine a ribbon pulling gently at each soft chin.

Hearing Tran that night at the Workshop, seeing her at the front of that low-ceilinged, airless room, and then meeting her afterward—when I declared to her that I too am a writer, despite my blue suit and black briefcase and my dull hair pulled tight into a neat, flavorless bun—was a pleasure: of seeing and of recognizing both a kindred body and a kindred spirit. Her presence in that space as writer and my presence in that space as listener (and soon to be dedicated reader of her work) disrupted the misery that had overwhelmed me, silenced me, nearly broken me. The pleasure of the literature of Asian America is about not being lonely.

I will leave you with this: The pleasure of body and of spirit are not distinct. Their borders are nonexistent. Asian America knows that borders are fictions written by war, conflicts, man-made disputes, and avarice. Asian American bodies and spirits have found a way to defy, to deny, and to breach the barriers of this land. That is the refrain of our plainsong, and I encourage you to sing it at every standing mic, on every social media platform, in every hallway of power, at every demonstration in the streets of this nation, and in every word that we contribute to this raucous, multiphonic chorus that is American literature.

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1. Reprinted with permission of Jessica Hagedorn. The poem was later included in her 2002 collection, *Danger and Beauty* (City Lights Publishers).
2. Reprinted with permission of Yuri Kageyama. The poem also appears in *The New and Selected Yuri: Writing from Peeling Till Now* (Ishmael Reed Publishing Co., 2011).
3. Both poems reprinted with permission of Barbara Tran.