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Restoring, Rewriting, Reimagining: Asian American Science Fiction Writers and the Time Travel Narrative

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**RESTORING, REWRITING, REIMAGINING: ASIAN AMERICAN
SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS AND THE TIME TRAVEL
NARRATIVE**

by
JOANNE CHERN

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR LIU
PROFESSOR JEON**

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Introduction

During the spring of 2014, I was a frequent and probably annoying customer at the college library, considering the unconscionable number of books I tended to check out at one time. My thesis topic, being rather specific and thus something of a niche subject, had not been addressed directly by more than one or two authors; thus, my reading material ranged particularly wide and esoteric.

On one night, I engaged in my regular exercise of hauling ten or so books to the checkout counter. The stack consisted of an assortment of topics not typically found together: studies on time travel literature, collections of Asian American literary and critical race theory, and several fat science fiction anthologies. The librarian behind the desk, a middle-aged white man, surveyed the lot with an understandable look of confusion. “Working on thesis?” he asked, and I nodded. “What’s your topic?”

“Asian American science fiction and time travel,” I replied. It was the vague working title that I tended to rattle off when speaking to people who were not my thesis readers or fellow English majors. The librarian, flipping over one of the books, continued to look bemused.

“Huh, that’s interesting. I don’t even know what that would be like – *Joy Luck Club* goes to Mars?”

He laughed at his own joke. I tried to keep the dismay that I felt off of my face.

I tell this story as an example of how little the public perception of Asian American literature has changed over the years. Amy Tan’s novel *The Joy Luck Club* was published in 1989, two and a half decades ago, and yet it is still strong in the public consciousness, and I cannot manage to escape its ghost. For people who are not involved

in Asian American studies, *The Joy Luck Club* tends to be the first – and sometimes only – work of Asian American literature that they can name. I have even had my own writing compared to Amy Tan's, for no other reason that I am an Asian American woman, writing about being an Asian American woman.

This is not to disparage Tan or her success as a writer, but to draw attention to where the perception of Asian American literature has stagnated. *The Joy Luck Club* is a classic example of Asian American literary tropes – immigrant woes, generational conflicts, and diasporic identity, just to name a few – and presents them forthrightly. These tropes reference important Asian American issues, but have been repeated to the point of stereotype.

So what methods can writers pursue, to move out of the shadow of *The Joy Luck Club*, while still telling an Asian American story?

The Roots of Asian American Literature

The term “Asian American” was coined in the 1970s; in the context of the Asian American movement, with its ties to the Civil Rights movement and the push for ethnic studies in the academy, the term became a powerful unifying factor for different Asian ethnic groups in America. “Asian American” brought together a highly heterogeneous group of people, up until that point identified as mostly separate, to present a united front to the opposition, while paying respect to the heterogeneity within the group.

With the coining of the term “Asian American” came a generation of writers who, for the first time, were consciously writing while self-identifying as Asian American. Certainly, there were other writers before this time period who wrote about the

experiences of Asians in America – many critics credit Eurasian writers Edith and Winnifred Eaton, who were of mixed Chinese and British descent and who wrote under the pseudonyms Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna respectively, as being the forerunners of Asian American writers – but the 1970s authors are now known as first generation Asian American authors. Their works set in motion the general themes that we now expect to see in Asian American literature: the immigrant experience, cross-generational and interpersonal conflicts, and the problem of resistance versus assimilation when it comes to dominant American culture. As a result of practices utilized by first generation authors, Asian American literature as a genre has been constructed around a link between ethnic identity and a particular type of narrative. In *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, Viet Thanh Nguyen points out:

Many works of Asian American literature center upon this identity crisis, and within the literary market the identity crisis is one of the major features with which Asian American literature is identified then marketed.

(Nguyen 149)

This “identity crisis” is very real for many Asian Americans, and thus important to explore in literature; however, the fact that Asian American literature is marketed on this conflict is fraught with complications. First is the way in which critics examine Asian American literature; Zhou Xiaojing, in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, notes that

critics tend to evaluate individual texts and authors according to a predominant formula, that is, according to whether the texts demonstrate

complicity with or resistance to the hegemonic ideologies of assimilation.

(Zhou 4)

This theme of resistance versus assimilation is usually seen as one of the most easily identifiable aspects of Asian American literature, and often becomes the focus of literary analysis. However, Zhou claims that this approach “overlooks the ways in which Asian American authors have resisted, subverted, and reshaped hegemonic European American literary genres” (4); by housing Asian American literature in a specific genre based upon ethnic identity, critics focus specifically on the way that the ethnic identity crisis manifests in the works. The point of examination becomes thematic content rather than form, and thus tends to ignore the author’s interactions with the genre in which they write.

Zhou continues on to call for a revitalization of Asian American literature and of the literary academy, seeking out new methods of literary expression that do not hinge upon ethnic identity and its crises. She emphasizes that

Asian American literature cannot be theorized in a priori fashion through appeal to an inherent relationship between ethnicity and a specific linguistic or narrative strategy. It can be addressed only through investigation of the interactive effects and conflicts among multiple structures of determination within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. This critical perspective breaks away from the expressive and binary models of constructing a literary tradition in terms of a discrete cultural origin or a singular, oppositional subject position. (17)

Zhou implies that one way to accomplish this goal is to engage with other genres – genres that are not exclusively the autobiographical immigrant narratives provided by earlier Asian American authors. In the years since the first Asian American novels were published, Asian American authors have begun to branch out, exploring new genres and new ways of telling their stories.

Asian American Fiction and Genre Writing

When critics write about Asian American authors interacting with their respective genres, they all tend to mention one work at some point: Chang-Rae Lee's 1995 novel, *Native Speaker*. The novel is remarkable in that it engages simultaneously in Asian American themes of identity and in the traditions of the spy/crime fiction genre – in fact, Lee uses these genre conventions as an analogy for a story about ethnic identity. The narrator, Henry Park, is a spy; he specifically uses the fact that he is Korean American to infiltrate certain spaces and engage with certain people. This spy identity addresses the multiplicity inherent in Asian American identity, so that Lee tells two stories – a spy tale, and what might be called an immigrant narrative – at the same time, their themes woven so closely together that it becomes impossible to talk about one without the other.

Native Speaker is an early example of an Asian American author engaging in genre writing, and thus investigating an alternative method of resisting hegemonic power structures. In *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, Betsy Huang describes this practice and its political implications:

Working within the established boundaries of popular fiction genres and the known quantities of audience tastes and expectations, Asian American

writers of immigrant, crime, and science fiction can confirm, contest, and, most importantly, rewrite the genericized narratives about Asian American history, culture, and identity. (Huang 7)

I choose to focus on the last genre that Huang lists: science fiction. This is partially out of personal interest, but also because of how science fiction works in conjunction with Asian American interests.

Traditionally, science fiction has been an expression of our societal concerns. By casting these familiar concerns in an unfamiliar environment, authors are able to examine, question, and possibly even provide hypothetical solutions to these problems. This seems like a rich and fruitful environment for writers of Asian American fiction, who can recast expected narratives – like *The Joy Luck Club* – in unexpected ways.

I am specifically interested in the time travel narrative because of its rather explicit ties to imperialism. *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, widely considered to be the defining text in English-language time travel fiction, is also typically read as an allegory for British imperialism. When we examine other mainstream tales of time travel, we can see a certain pattern of imperialist privilege, particularly in the trope of traveling back in time and being able to manipulate events to one's liking. I wish to investigate alternative modes of time travel and the impact that they might have on time travel narrative in general.

To this end, I have chosen three works as case studies: Ken Liu's "The Man Who Ended History," Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, and Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life." All three involve time travel – though I play somewhat fast and loose with this term, since these stories treat it as a mostly mental

process rather than a physical one – and all three couch the common theme of time travel in an examination of the narrative process. Thus, these stories are just as much about self-consciously examining the act of writing, particularly within a certain genre, as they are about time.

Despite these commonalities, my interest lies not in discovering what these stories have in common, but where they are different. I wish to examine the diverse narratives that can arise even from so specific a theme, and what they can reveal about where the future of Asian American fiction might lead.

Chapter 1: Nation and Narrative in “The Man Who Ended History”

Introduction: Restoring History

Combining elements of real-life history, contemporary fictional politics, and just a touch of scientific fantasy, Ken Liu’s novella “The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary” spans a wide variety of interconnected subjects. The story’s historical backdrop is Unit 731, a covert unit of the Imperial Japanese Army active during the Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Located in Japanese-occupied Manchuria, Unit 731 was a base for biological and chemical warfare experimentation, where Japanese military surgeons performed brutal human experiments on prisoners of war. After the end of World War II, these doctors were exonerated by General Douglas MacArthur, so that the American government could keep the results of their research away from the Soviet Union. The real-life details of Unit 731 have never been fully revealed, and reparations were never given to the victims’ families.¹

These historical events set the stage for the story proper, which takes place in the early 2000s, mimicking familiar international politics – a sort of “alternate present.” Liu’s story revolves around the fictional Chinese American historian Dr. Evan Wei; along with his wife, Japanese American physicist Akemi Kirino, Wei develops a technique that allows people to “travel back in time and experience history as it occurred” (Liu 118). He intends to use this technique to expose the truth about Unit 731 and bring history into the present, where its atrocities cannot be ignored.

However, this is not without complications. The technique is ultimately *destructive*: only one person can travel back to any given moment in time, and once he or

¹ For more information on Unit 731: Liu gives a detailed list of historical sources in his author’s notes for “The Man Who Ended History.”

she has witnessed that time, no one can ever see it again. Beyond this technical flaw are larger complications – the evolution of both Japan and China in the wars since World War II, and the academic debate over legitimacy. These factors all combine to stir up international controversy, which eventually leads to the time travel project being shut down.

At fifty-five pages, “The Man Who Ended History” is a rather lean literary work; nevertheless, it manages to condense a large amount of history and politics quite effectively. Liu utilizes a documentary-style narrative, which allows him to capture a wide range of viewpoints. At the center of the story is Akemi Kirino, who narrates the majority of the documentary in the years after her husband, unable to reconcile himself with what he sees as the abject failure of his project, commits suicide. By framing the story in this way, Liu avoids getting lost in historical abstractions and political entanglements, instead grounding the narrative in the emotional core of Kirino and Wei’s relationship.

Beyond the story itself, “The Man Who Ended History” also has a fascinating and very important genealogy. In his author’s notes, Liu dedicates the story to “the memory of Iris Chang and all the victims of Unit 731” (166). The mention of Iris Chang, Chinese American author of *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, is an interesting one. Published in 1997, *The Rape of Nanking* details the mass murder and war rape committed by Japanese troops in Nanking – modern-day Nanjing, and former capital of the Republic of China – during the Sino-Japanese War. The book was “the first full-length nonfiction account of the event” (Fox: “Iris Chang, Who Chronicled Rape of

Nanking, Dies at 36”), and brought international attention to a previously obscured part of Japanese history.

Regarding her book, Chang said, “I wrote it [*The Rape of Nanking*] out of a sense of rage...It was important to me that the world knew what happened in Nanking back in 1937” (Fox: “Iris Chang, Who Chronicled Rape of Nanking, Dies at 36”). Additionally, she accused the Japanese of committing a “‘second rape’ by suppressing and even denying what happened in Nanjing” (Burrell: “Wars of Memory”). *The Rape of Nanking*, with its upsetting subject matter and inflammatory narrative style, garnered great international controversy, particularly among American, Japanese, and Chinese readers. In fiercely demanding justice and reparations from Japan for the Unit 731 victims, Chang won high regard from Chinese and Chinese American readers; however, her actions also caused her role as an author to be questioned. Was she an activist, or a historian? Stanford University historian David Kennedy criticized Chang’s reliance on “accusation and outrage, rather than analysis and understanding” (Burrell), implying that, in abandoning scholarly neutrality for a clear emotional stance, Chang had lost regard within the academic community.²

In 2004, after suffering from mental illness for several years, Chang committed suicide.³ It is not difficult to see the parallels between real-life Iris Chang and fictional Evan Wei – both Chinese American, both committed to exposing Japanese wartime atrocities, and both heavily criticized by the academic community for their reliance on

² For more information on the controversy over *The Rape of Nanking*: “Wars of Memory” by Charles Burrell (SF Gate, 1998), gives a good general overview of Chang’s supporters and detractors, as well as her effect on other media forms.

³ For more information on Iris Chang’s life: Chang’s long-time friend Paula Kamen authored the biography *Finding Iris Chang: Friendship, Ambition, and the Loss of an Extraordinary Mind* (Da Capo Press, 2007).

pathos. Both tried to draw attention to what they saw as huge historical oversights, and both suffered for their dedication.

The connection between Chang and Wei is important because of the weight it lends to “The Man Who Ended History.” The issues that Liu tackles, and the themes that I will address in my analysis – the temporal identity of a nation, the way in which history complicates international relations, and the problem of narrative and human emotion in academic history – are not just contained to the fictional realm, but have a real life analog. Underneath all the interwoven strands of history, contemporary politics, and science fictional narrative, is a more fundamental and timeless examination of how humanity attempts to make sense of time and space through narrative. “The Man Who Ended History” shows how one person – whether Iris Chang, Evan Wei, or some other individual – can enact change in the world, by giving voices to the many silenced throughout the course of history.

Investigating the State’s “Temporal Dimension”: Using History to Complicate the Nation

In 1882, French historian Ernest Renan attempted to answer a crucial question put forth in the title of his essay: “What is a Nation?” One of the key elements, he says, is the collective *forgetting* of history:

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the

origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality.

The existence of a nation depends upon its temporality just as much as, if not more than, it does on physical space. Both synchronic and diachronic – that is, interested both in its existence at a specific point in time, and in how it has evolved over time – a nation must nevertheless be primarily concerned with how it exists in the *present*.⁴ A nation’s present existence is, therefore, privileged above all of its other previous existences. To probe too deeply into the nature of these previous existences calls into question the legitimacy of the current incarnation; thus, Renan expresses a concern regarding “historical enquiry” and the dangers it may pose for nationality.

The implications of such historical enquiry are important points of contention in “The Man Who Ended History.” In the documentary, international relations over Evan Wei’s new time traveling technique stand thus:

The Japanese government claims that China is engaged in a propaganda stunt, and it has filed a strongly-worded protest with Beijing for allowing this demonstration. Citing principles of international law, Japan argues that China does not have the right to sponsor an expedition to World War Two-era Harbin because Harbin was then under the control of Manchukuo, a puppet regime of the Japanese Empire. China has rejected the Japanese claim, and responded by declaring Dr. Wei’s demonstration an “excavation of national heritage” and now claims ownership rights over

⁴ “Synchronic” and “diachronic” are taken from Ferdinand de Saussure’s definitions, given in *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure’s “synchronic” and “diachronic” refer specifically to linguistics; here, I use the terms in an analogous fashion to describe the nation.

any visual or audio record of Dr. Wei's proposed journey to the past under Chinese antiquities-export laws. (Liu 118)

The character Archibald Ezary comments that "a state has a temporal dimension as well as a spatial one" (120), and that fact becomes starkly apparent here. Jurisdiction over a space – Harbin, in this case – becomes far more complicated when the issue of time is called into question as well. If Wei is investigating Unit 731 as it existed in Japanese-controlled Harbin, does this give the Japanese government the right to claim that history as their own? Or does the current Chinese government have the right to sponsor such an expedition?

In the novella, current-day Japan exists through a careful disavowal of its predecessors; it maintains good relations with the international community specifically because its current government has distanced itself from wartime imperial Japan. The current Japanese government – created through a constitution drafted by America, and supposedly absolved of war crimes by the Treaty of San Francisco and other bilateral treaties – portrays itself not as a continuation of WWII-era Japan, but as something new and different, which cannot be blamed for wartime atrocities because Japan simply was not the same nation then that it is now.

Renan's ideas are demonstrated in Liu's depiction of Japan – the Japanese nation depends upon this forgetting of the past, but exposure of Unit 731 secrets threatens the status of the current nation. By attempting to claim jurisdiction over that part of history, Japan contradicts its previous statements – that the current government cannot be held responsible for reparations to Chinese citizens, because the administration is a completely different one – by implying a connection to the nation during wartime. For current-day

Japan to declare ownership over Harbin's history, it must admit an attachment to the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo, and by extension, claim responsibility for all of the crimes perpetrated by that government. Since Japan is not willing to accomplish the latter, the government's invoking of international law rings somewhat false.

And yet China's claim is not a clear-cut one either; Ezary points out that during the time period in question, the People's Republic of China – the current Chinese government – did not even *exist* yet. Guerilla forces did mount a resistance against the Manchukuo administration, but they were not affiliated with Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party, and so "had little to do with the eventual founding of the People's Republic" (122). This statement creates a clear divide between the Chinese government and its citizenry, emphasized by the multiplicity of Chinese viewpoints given throughout the course of the documentary. Does it make sense for the current Chinese government to lay claim to a predecessor that seems so different?

The fact that the Chinese government refers to antiquities-export laws to support its case is also somewhat problematic – it casts history as something that can be examined objectively, rather than as a story that still affects the modern Chinese nation. In order to claim jurisdiction over Unit 731's history, both Japan and China need to acknowledge their closeness to previous incarnations of their nations – something that their current governments have tried to minimize as much as possible. Wei's investigation of the past has brought history very close to the present, exposing secrets that have been collectively forgotten and thus destabilizing the concepts of the Japanese and Chinese nations.

The issue is further complicated by relations between Japan, China, and the Western world, which mimic their real-life counterparts. Ezary comments that the Chinese view would have had the support of most of the Western world – the Japanese position is akin to Germany arguing that attempts to travel to Auschwitz-Birkenau between 1939 and 1945 should be subject to its approval – but for the fact that it is the People’s Republic of China, a Western pariah, which is now making a claim. And so you see the present and the past will strangle each other to death. (121)

In the novella, Japan and China’s statuses as international powers depend on their current political and economic climates, and how they relate, as nations, to the rest of the world. Liu points out that Japan, once a hated Axis power with imperialist ambitions, has become an acknowledged “friend” of the Western powers, and is a worldwide producer and exporter of consumer goods. Meanwhile, after becoming a Communist country during the first half of the twentieth century, China has emerged as a capitalist giant in the modern world. The country’s meteoric rise to economic power is somewhat tainted, however, by news of governmental corruption and human rights violations, which makes China, in Ezary’s words, “a Western pariah.

However, history recasts Japan and China in their respective roles of villain and victim, complicating the nations’ present identities, and thus calling the power of international law into question. Ezary comments that “all along, we have made international law work only by assuming that the past would remain silent” (122). This echoes and ties into Renan’s assertion that a nation is built on the collective forgetting of history. For international law to work, the discreet entities known as “nations” must

exist; for nations to exist, their people must forget the violent events that shaped their nation. The past must remain silent, and prior to the events of “The Man Who Ended History”, it does – the suffering of Unit 731’s victims is lost to time, the evidence either destroyed by the Japanese or confiscated by the American government. But when Wei brings forth his time traveling technique, everything is thrown into flux. Wei has managed to make history available to be witnessed by all. With this development, the presence of the past can no longer be ignored.

In the introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha writes that “nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.” Wei, it must be noted, is a specialist in the Heian period of Japanese history – “because,” he tells Kirino, “that was when Japan first became *Japan*” (Liu 125). He is fundamentally interested in origins, a fact reflected in his technique. Wei is not content to allow the narrative of a nation to be lost “in the myths of time” – he wishes to make it immediate and tangible, believing that “if people could see and hear the past, then it would no longer be possible to remain apathetic” (128).

In the next section, I will address the implications of Wei’s technique, and his attempts to seek out an obscured narrative at its origin point. This ultimately becomes a major point of contention within the story, asking the ongoing question: what is the role of the individual narrative, and how do we treat it in relation to history?

Narrative and the Academy

In “The Man Who Ended History,” Liu uses science fiction not so much as the novella’s ruling genre, but more as a literalized analog for narrative analysis. This is

manifested in the mechanism of Wei's time travel technique, which acts as a significant contributor to its controversy. Wei's wife and fellow developer, Akemi Kirino, says that while their time-traveling discovery, the Bohm-Kirino particles, were able to gather information from the past, the data collected was too much for any existing computer to handle. But Kirino, not to be dissuaded, thinks up an alternative:

I came up with the idea of using the human brain to process the information gathered by the Bohm-Kirino detectors...The brain could be given the raw electrical signals, throw 99.999% of it away, turn the rest into sight, sound, smell, and make sense of it all and record them as memories. (119)

The trope of the time machine is a familiar one: the traveler enters the machine and is instantly transported outside of their own time. As the traveler's actual body is involved in the transportation process, there is a significant level of physicality to the traditional time travel narrative. The traveler is able to use his or her senses to process history, and the physical aspect seems to lend legitimacy to a seemingly impossible journey. When all of the senses can be utilized in the unfamiliar time, the traveler must conclude that what is happening is real.

Kirino's machine is reminiscent of this trope, though with significant changes. In this case, the time machine is not just an external piece of hardware, but also involves the subject's brain. The information can only be made legible through the human senses, similar to the trope of physical time travel. Yet in "The Man Who Ended History", the body remains stationary – it is the brain that conjures the entire thing.

“For our volunteer subjects, the process creates the illusion of experiencing the past, as though they were in that place, at that time” (120), Kirino writes. She later states that she regrets her use of the word “illusion”, as Wei’s detractors use the word to delegitimize the project. The process of filtering information through the human brain might anchor history in physical sensation, but in doing so, history becomes highly individualized. There is no way to fit another traveler into the machine, to bring someone else along for the same ride. The subject is the only one who sees that particular point in history – and once he or she does, no one else can ever view the same moment. Others must rely on the subject’s account of what he or she saw, a caveat that several people take issue with. Victor P. Lowenson, Wei’s mentor and fellow historian, has this to say:

In my view, he [Wei] has abdicated the responsibility of the historian to ensure that the truth is not ensnared in doubt. He has crossed the line that divides a historian from an activist.

As I see it, the fight here isn’t ideological, but *methodological*. What we are fighting over is what constitutes proof. Historians trained in Western and Asian traditions have always relied on the documentary record, but Dr. Wei is now raising the primacy of eyewitness accounts, and not even contemporaneous eyewitness accounts, mind you, but accounts by witnesses out of the stream of time. (153)

Here, Lowenson draws a distinction between documentary record and eyewitness accounts, two methods of telling history that are not necessarily so different.

Documentary record’s genealogy – and indeed, all history’s genealogy – can be traced back to the eyewitness account. In order for history to be recorded at all, someone must

have seen events, then reported and recorded them somehow. This principle is reflected in the story's form: "The Man Who Ended History" is subtitled "A Documentary," but it is comprised of first-person accounts. In the end, what Lowenson calls "documentary record" is merely a formal rendering of eyewitness narratives. [does this need more cited sources?]

Lowenson's objections seem to stem largely from the nature of the eyewitnesses. "Out of the stream of time," he calls them – thus, outside of the context of that particular moment in history. Yet even this is not entirely accurate. For example, Akemi Kirino describes one of Wei's motivations to create the time travel technique:

And so the War shaped Evan's life, as it shaped the lives of all Chinese, even if he was not aware of all of its ramifications. (128)

The events at Unit 731 shaped all of the eyewitnesses' lives, whether they are conscious of it or not. They are not truly "out of the stream of time," as Lowenson says; they are joined to those moments, a product of that time. And for Wei, this is a major galvanizing factor. He is most interested in the immediacy of first-person experience, of removing the distancing elements of time and distance, so that the past is suddenly very, very close. In the documentary, Wei is recorded as giving the following statement:

What my wife and I have done is take narrative away, and to give us all a chance to see the past with our own eyes. In place of memory, we now have incontrovertible evidence. Instead of exploiting the dead, we must look into the face of the dying. *I have seen these crimes with my own eyes.* You cannot deny that. (152)

Though Wei's intentions are commendable, there are notable contradictions between his theory and his practice. As he says, for the individuals who go through the time travel process and view history as it happened, external narrative is indeed "taken away," replaced by sensory, first-person experience; however, this process only works on an individual level. In order to share their experiences with the world – which is the only way that Wei's methods have a chance of being recognized at all, particularly by the academic community – the witnesses must engage in the act of narration.

And therein lies the perpetual conflict around Wei's techniques. As Wei says, "We are a species that loves narrative, but we have also been taught not to trust an individual speaker." This complicates the idea of history, which Wei calls "a narrative enterprise" (152) – but *whose* narrative? Wei seeks to complicate an established narrative, but his reliance on individual speakers and eyewitness accounts proves to be his downfall. What the academic world values is a single coherent narrative, given by multiple people; what Wei provides is a series of different narratives that cannot be verified through normal academic means. This is the fatal flaw of his technique: he cannot escape the narrative form, so he cannot provide the real "proof" that he so desires.

The conflict between academia and humanity lurks around the project from its inception, as Wei struggles to appease multiple sides at once. Lu Ruming sums it up well, saying:

[Wei] was forced to distance his effort from the Chinese people in order to preserve the political credibility of his project in the West. He sacrificed their goodwill in a bid to make the West care. Evan tried to appease the West and Western prejudices against China. (145)

Lu's words point to the circumstances around Wei's technique, and demonstrate that his failure was not completely self-incurred. There are systems of power that exist far outside Wei's control – the West-dominated system of “respected” academia, preexisting hostilities between nations, and the stifled grievances of many, many people. One person with a single solution could not possibly address all of them; because of this, the title “The Man Who Ended History” is quite the ironic misnomer. Wei, for all of his grand intentions and noble hopes, is only a single man. A single man cannot stand against the history of nations – Wei tries to shift the balance, and ends up broken in the process.

Conclusion: The Power of the Story

“The Man Who Ended History” offers no satisfying conclusion. Wei, who might have been our titular hero, commits suicide. The Comprehensive Time Travel Moratorium is created as a method of, once again, putting off the past, suppressing history in order to continue on with the present. In many ways, life returns to the way it was before Wei attempted his radical time travel techniques. The central question – was Wei's technique a success? – is left unanswered.

Yet the outlook is not completely bleak. Ienaga Ito emphasizes the value of Wei's work despite its controversial nature, saying:

We live in an age that prizes authenticity and personalized narratives, as embodied in the form of the memoir. Eyewitness accounts have an immediacy and reality that compels belief, and we think they can convey a truth greater than any fiction. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, we are also eager to seize upon any factual deviation and inconsistency in such

narratives, and declare the entirety to be *mere* fiction. There is an all-or-nothing bleakness to this dynamic. But we should have conceded from the start that narrative is irreducibly subjective, though that does not mean that they do not also convey the truth...What Evan did was to transform historical investigation itself into a form of memoir writing...[He] tried to introduce more empathy and emotion into historical inquiry. For this he was crucified by the academic establishment. But adding empathy and the irreducibly subjective dimension of the personal narrative to history does not detract from the truth. It enhances the truth. (155)

Ienaga reminds us of history's complexity: that it is ultimately constructed from the stories of *people*, despite our prizing an illusion of some kind of "truth." In the end, any sort of "truth" must be examined critically, each seemingly universal narrative held up against those that may challenge it.

In the final narrative, we are left with Akemi Kirino, who tells her story as a witness. She sees her grandfather, the supervisor of Unit 731. But she does not condemn him, choosing not to call him a monster because of his actions:

Labeling someone a monster implies that he is from another world, one which has nothing to do with us. It cuts off the bonds of affection and fear, assures us of our own superiority, but there's nothing learned, nothing gained. It's simple, but it's cowardly. (164)

Calling historical figures "monsters" is not some kind of revelatory "proof"; it is merely another way of suppressing history. Dehumanizing the past ignores the ties that it has to the present – it allows people to turn a blind eye to their history, to ignore accountability.

One cannot repeat the mistakes of the past, after all, if those mistakes were made by *monsters*, and not by humans.

But this is a dangerous and unproductive path to take. Instead, Kirino urges the audience to remember our connection to the people of the past, to remember our common *humanity*. At the core of “The Man Who Ended History” is a longing to *humanize* history, to recognize as a series of individual narratives, rather than attempt to abstract it into a series of truths.

At a 2009 TED Conference, Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie spoke of the power that stories can have:

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize.

Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Narratives are how we make sense of the world around us, and communicate our findings to others. As with all human things, narratives are fallible – any single narrative runs the very real risk of essentializing, stereotyping, *minimizing* a person, a group of people, or even an entire country. In “The Man Who Ended History,” Liu demonstrates an awareness of that power, and mediates it not only in content, but also in form. The multiple viewpoints disrupt our expectation of a single narrative; within the story, testimonies from different witnesses complicate official history and the single narrative of national identity.

In the end, I believe this is the final message: there are always voices that must be heard, stories that must be told. “The silence of the victims of the past imposes a duty on

the present to recover their voices,” Akemi Kirino says, “and we are most free when we willingly take up that duty” (164). Despite all of its controversies and complications, Wei’s method of time travel is ultimately about freedom – the freedom to seek out narratives lost to time, and the freedom to bring them into the present. It is the freedom to call the single narrative into question, and to hold its authors accountable to their own subjectivities. It is the freedom to empower, to humanize, and to repair the broken dignity of an entire people.

Chapter 2: Melancholia and Minority in *How to Live Safely in a Science*

Fictional Universe

Introduction: Rewriting Immigrant Narratives

In a 2012 interview with the Asian American Literary Review, author Charles Yu described his novel *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* as an immigrant story:

It occurred to me while writing the novel that the immigrant, the outsider experience, was the perfect map – being an immigrant is exactly like being someone who is trying to navigate another universe.

How to Live Safely is set in Minor Universe 31, a science fictional universe, where time travel is commonplace. The story follows a protagonist – also named Charles Yu – who works as a time travel technician rescuing people who damage their machines through inappropriate usage. He is haunted by the memory of his father, an immigrant to the science fictional realm, who once attempted to invent a time machine and initially failed; he eventually succeeded, only to escape his own time line, leaving his wife and son behind.

The protagonist lives inside his own time machine, out of the normal stream of time, for a good part of the novel. But eventually, he is forced to bring his machine in for repairs – at which point he runs into his future self, shoots him, and thus traps himself in a time loop. The key to getting out and finding his father is the book that his future self hands him, a book entitled *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*.

Yu reimagines the immigrant narrative, a common thread in Asian American literature, as the story of a science fictional traveler, trying to parse out the rules of an

unfamiliar universe. He utilizes science fiction's generic conventions to literalize many immigrant narrative tropes, in particular the concepts of melancholia and minority, and examines where the pain of racialization may become productive.

The Melancholy of Minor Universe 31

In *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*, Anne Anlin Cheng describes the racialized individual as *melancholy*, constantly preoccupied with loss:

“Melancholia”...is pathological; it is interminable in nature and refuses substitution (that is, the melancholic cannot “get over” loss.) The melancholic is, one might say, psychically stuck...Melancholia thus denotes a condition of endless self-impoverishment. (4)

The definition of melancholia that Cheng uses is Freudian, and has several characteristics that distinguish it from a similar process, *mourning*. Mourning is a regular reaction to loss and not pathological. Mourning is finite, while melancholia is not – melancholia is a psychically rooted process, in which the individual cannot help but dwell on loss, constantly revisiting and thus reenacting pain upon the self.

The entire mechanism of time travel in *How to Live Safely* is predicated on this Freudian melancholia, built on the common human experience of “moving in a constant forward direction, the whole time looking backward” (Yu 22). The novel's science fictional elements turn this mental process into a physical one, in which people can interact with the past, though by the novel's rules of time travel, they are unable to enact any sort of change.

When we first meet the protagonist, he is living in his time machine, which can be seen as a personalized pocket of space-time. Rather than passing time linearly, the protagonist chooses to live in a state that he calls the “Present-Indefinite”:

It used to be that you could cheat the machine by leaving it between gears, living in kind of a half-assed way, present and at the same time not quite in the present, hovering, floating, used to be you could avoid ever pinning yourself to any particular moment, could go through life never actually being where you are. Or, I suppose, more accurately, being *when* you are.

(Yu 55-6)

Grammatically speaking, the idea of a present-indefinite sense is impossible. The present itself is fleeting, slipping by even as we consciously attempt to identify it. In a way, to think of the present is to lose it immediately. Thus, the present is a moving target that can never be hit, slipping between past and future. It allows the protagonist “to live achronologically, to suppress memory, to ignore the future” (56) – essentially, to *escape*. And given the pain that he experiences as a time travel repairman, this method, though technically “cheating,” makes sense.

In his line of work, the protagonist witnesses many clients who grapple unsuccessfully with regret, using their time machines to try and change the past. One of his clients tampers with her time machine in order to be beside her grandmother at her deathbed, though the client was not present when her grandmother actually passed away. The protagonist explains to the client that what she is experiencing is “a false past, a past you wish you could go to” (44), but one that is still infinitely far away. The client can

never actually be there as her grandmother dies; remaining in this ideal moment, where she was present for her grandmother's last moments, would mean slipping through into another, completely different universe. Simply speaking, the client has deliberately stranded herself in this moment in hopes of somehow addressing her greatest regret – and the protagonist's job is to get her out, and return her safely home.

The client experiences a conflict between her wish, and the metaphysical impossibility of fulfilling that wish without obliterating her current reality. Her situation speaks well to what Cheng calls the “double malady of melancholia”:

The double malady of melancholia for a racial-ethnic subject *is* the condition of having to incorporate and encrypt both an impossible ideal and a denigrated self. More than any other identificatory disorders, racial melancholia speaks of a dream of perfection. (Cheng 72)

The “dream of perfection,” in this case, is the client's fervent desire to have been present at her grandmother's deathbed. However, she has created a classic time paradox – she is arriving from some point in the future *after* her grandmother's death, having set up some kind of life for herself, but in order to change the past and rectify her single greatest regret, the client must relinquish the familiarity of the life that comes after that moment. There is no way to incorporate the ideal – being with the grandmother – and the denigrated self – the client as she is now, created in the very *context* of regret.

Other characters demonstrate this melancholic preoccupation with loss and inability to relinquish pain – the novel's most explicit example of this effect is the protagonist's mother, who has retired to an artificial time loop, which the protagonist wryly refers to as “the sci-fi version of assisted living” (Yu 20):

It's not ideal, obviously, I guess this is what she wants, to live in a kind of imperfect past tense, in a state of recurrence and continuation, an ambiguous, dreamlike state, a good hour, a family dinner we could have had, on a good day, but never did, an hour that continually repeats, is always happening, and yet is fixed in its already having happened. (21)

Much later, the protagonist tells us that his mother has “spent a lifetime grieving” (124) over lost loved ones – her brother, her mother, and finally, her husband. This information reveals a kind of paradoxical doubling: in escaping from an emotional cycle of loss and perpetual grief, the mother places herself in a *literal* loop, constantly revisiting what she has lost. Her loss is also her son's loss, though he copes in a slightly different way.

Between the specter of the unattainable, idealized past and the threat of a future that promises only more regret, stretching the present is the only way for the protagonist to completely remove himself from the melancholic cycle. He refers to his father's obsession with “the intractability and general awfulness of trying to parse the idea of *once*” (17); the Present-Indefinite tense seems like the answer and solution to *once*. In the present, everything is *once*, a moment that stretches on indefinitely in all directions.

Yet the protagonist is not actually free from the melancholic cycle of grief. Though he claims not to miss his father anymore, the fact that he spends most of the novel constantly dwelling on the man causes this claim to ring rather false. Unlike the client and the mother, who revisit the past in a literal sense, enabled by time travel technology, the protagonist relives his painful moments in a way that we recognize: through memory. Regarding memory, Yu has this to say:

Every time a user recalls a memory, he is not only remembering it, but also, from an electrochemical perspective, literally re-creating the experience as well. (149)

Despite not using his time machine to travel into his past, the protagonist is engaging in the same melancholic practice of revisiting and recreating painful experiences in his life. This connects with the novel's central principle of time travel: that the machine is modeled on a person's innate ability to travel through time:

Everyone has a time machine. Everyone *is* a time machine. It's just that most people's machines are broken. The strangest and hardest kind of time travel is the unaided kind. People get stuck, people get looped. People get trapped. But we are all time machines. We are all perfectly engineered time machines, technologically equipped to allow the inside user, the traveler riding inside each of us, to experience time travel, and loss, and understanding. We are universal time machines manufactured to the most exacting specifications possible. Every single one of us. (164-5)

Melancholy Minority

Given the seemingly universal sense of melancholy inherent in *How to Live Safely*, it is tempting to categorize melancholia as a general human condition. However, we must remember that the protagonist's father created one of the earliest time machines, and that the mechanism stemmed from his own innate experience of time as an immigrant minority. Thus, the melancholia that pervades all of Minor Universe 31 can be seen as stemming from a racial melancholia.

How to Live Safely is preoccupied with what it means to be “minor.” The novel takes place in “Minor Universe 31,” a functioning world that has been left incomplete by its architects (thus fitting the description of melancholic itself), where reality is minor in comparison to science fiction. This is shown through the novel’s immigrant narrative: the protagonist’s father is described as “an immigrant to a new continent of opportunity, a land of possibility, to the science fictional area” (71), having moved there from a tiny island in “reality.” Though hopeful of achieving success in the science fictional area, the protagonist’s father is just one of many immigrants from reality who have been unable to assimilate into science fiction:

Despite improvement in recent years, successful transition into the SF zone remains difficult to achieve for many immigrant families, and even after decades of an earnest and often desperate striving for acceptance and assimilation, many remain in the lower-middle reaches of the zone, along the border between SF and “reality”. (78)

Little is known about “reality,” as it is not the focus of Yu’s story; however, the distinction between “reality” and “science fiction” is an interesting one. Designating the SF zone as the desired destination, the novel’s allegory for America, has the effect of privileging fiction over reality. In moving to the SF zone, the protagonist’s father must learn the new language of fiction, the ability to create a coherent narrative of him and his family in the world.

This is far easier said than done, as the novel’s events prove. As writer Chimamanda Adichie says:

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, “secondly.”

Barghouti’s emphasis on “secondly” is, I believe, closely related to Yu’s fixation on the concept of “minor.”⁵ The protagonist’s father does not succeed in the SF zone because, despite his best efforts, his story has already been written for him. The director, who meets him in the field and politely waits for the expected conclusion of failure, understands this; the protagonist, too, seems able to predict the inevitable outcome of their endeavor. “In the grand scheme of things, we are minor” (172), he thinks; however his father strives to adapt to the language of science fiction, to create his own narrative of success, it will always be secondary to the existing science fictional narrative. The dominant narrative will always be one that puts the father, the immigrant, in a prescribed place. The great melancholic tragedy, of course, is that he will never *stop* trying to break from the prescribed narrative:

And yet my father will never stop trying, my father will go on for years after this day, thinking that if he just reads another book, just figures out the key, the secret, the world, the world of science fiction with its promise and possibility, will open up to him, to us, for us. (175)

Cheng writes that “the social lesson of racial minorization reinforces itself through the imaginative loss of a never-possible perfection” (17). The father learns his minor status

⁵ For further information on the relationship between “minor” and “minority”: *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 1990), edited by Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, is a useful collection of essays from different scholars.

through bitter experience; the protagonist learns through witnessing his father's perpetual disappointment. During this process, he participates in "the internalization of discipline and rejection – *and* the installation of a scripted context of perception" (17), which Cheng identifies as elements of racial melancholia.

For the protagonist, it is the intimate knowledge of minorization that haunts him throughout his entire life. In his father's failures, he has witnessed the concept on an individual level; at the same time, the protagonist also understands the minority status of humanity in general, powerless as they are to the inexorable flow of time:

We aren't important enough. No one is. Even in our own lives. We're not strong enough, willful enough, skilled enough in chronodiegetic manipulation to be able to just accidentally change the entire course of anything, even ourselves...Time isn't an orderly stream...It is a self-healing substance, which is to say, almost everything will be lost. We are too slight, too inconsequential, despite all of our thrashing...that doesn't even register in the depths, in the powerful undercurrents miles below us, taking us wherever they are taking us. (Yu 14)

In the protagonist's cynical view, time makes everyone's lives minor. The huge swell of time, like a gigantic ocean, will sweep on, and no individual's actions will ever make a difference. The progress of time has already been written out in a way that no human can comprehend. There is simply no way to win against it.

Knowing this, it is no wonder that the protagonist is melancholic, incapable as he is of "beating" time and enacting change on his own life. He is clearly filled with regret for many different reasons, but there is no way to rectify that regret – time ushers him

forward, away from that moment. Every mistake adds weight, so that perfection is impossible. And in time, the protagonist knows, even the pain associated with a particular memory will be lost. In this melancholy grief, he seeks out the Present-Indefinite as a way to cling desperately to an isolated point outside of time, an escape from the inevitable narrative of minority and erasure.

The Future-Self Help Book: Safety for the Hypochondriac

With the racial melancholia and minorization dogging the story's footsteps at every turn, the novel's title and central conceit becomes far more complex. Just how *does* one live safely in a science fictional universe?

Safety is addressed in the painful scene between the protagonist, his father, and the director, where the protagonist realizes that his father is doomed to fail, and wishes desperately that they had never left the house with their invention:

I am watching my self thinking, *We should have stayed in our garage*. I am watching him think that and I am thinking it myself now. Why couldn't we have just stayed in there, in our laboratory, our space. We should have stayed where we were *safe*. (182; emphasis added)

Earlier in the novel, the protagonist tells us, "I've been getting into and out of boxes all my life" (129). One of his earliest boxes is the garage, which he identifies as a "laboratory," thus designating it as a sanctioned site of experimentation, where ideas can be rehearsed as many times as necessary before producing a product. His insistent repetition of possessive pronouns – "*our* laboratory, *our* space" – emphasizes a preoccupation with ownership, or the ability to have complete control over a space.

The protagonist's desire to stay in the garage is an echo of a scene previously shown in the novel, where he describes the time machine:

The unit, this phone booth, this four-dimensional person-sized laboratory, I live in it, but, over time, through diffusion and breathing and particle exchange, the air in here, the air that travels with me, it is me, and I'm it.
(26-7)

As with the garage, the protagonist describes the time machine as a "laboratory," casting it as a space of experimentation. He has ownership and near-total control of the time machine – in fact, the machine is practically a part of him – and is entirely isolated from the rest of humanity, thus avoiding the possibility of judgment and failure.

After experiencing his father's failure, the protagonist anticipates his own future failures, and copes by attempting to escape that narrative altogether. However, his effort ultimately proves unsuccessful – his machine breaks down and he is forced to bring it in for repairs, during which time he meets his future self. The encounter shocks him, and he ends up shooting his future self. In a moment of violence, the protagonist is dragged out of his "in-between" state and into a sequence of events that will, inevitably, end with his being shot.

In Chapter 3 of *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng addresses the connection between racial melancholia and hypochondria, saying that "we can think of the Freudian melancholic as someone hypochondriacally aware of and allergic to the abjection lodged within" (65). She further elaborates upon the strange connections that assimilation and hypochondria can have:

As the process by which a minority group or individual adopts the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture, assimilation is meant to cover over sites of cultural breaks, gaps, and incommensurability. In contrast, hypochondria would seem to impose a logic whereby that which is (or might be) broken, disordered, or incompatible gets continually exposed. Yet a counterintuitive connection between assimilation and hypochondria can reveal, on the parts of the racial-ethnic subject, the crisis of a sociability *conditioned* by the anticipation of its own failure. It is a crisis that gets played out *on and against* the body in a drama of hypochondria. In the heart of every assimilative gesture lies the haunting anxiety of social failure. (77-8)

The protagonist's encounter with his future self and the events that occur thereafter could be seen as a sort of prolonged "drama of hypochondria." It is not illness as we might recognize it, but a morbid certainty of death – he has shot himself, so he knows that he will be shot as well. Whatever happens in the interim, the outcome is always, will always, and has always, been the same.

However, the hypochondriac state also reveals what Cheng calls "the crisis of sociability *conditioned* by the anticipation of its own failure." Knowing the ending of his story, the protagonist decides to skip to the end of *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, the book that his future self hands him. He ends up in what he calls "the subjunctive mode" (125) – which, when used with its grammatical definition, is an alternate hypothetical universe, a kind of grammatical wish fulfillment. There, the

protagonist encounters a woman, whom he refers to as the “Woman My Mother Should Have Been.”

This Woman My Mother Should Have Been is like the Platonic ideal of my mother, I realize, and yet at the same time the idea of that angers me? Who made this place? Who is to say that my mother, exactly as she is, my mother-in-fact, isn't the exact perfect version of herself? (125)

It is only through the workings of a science fictional universe, and through the slippage of grammar, that the protagonist could actually have a face-to-face encounter with an ideal – a *Platonic* ideal, in front of which all other representations of his mother would fade, their imperfections glaringly apparent. The Woman My Mother Should Have Been is also The Woman My Mother Will *Never* Be, the unattainable ideal, the “dream of perfection” that keeps the melancholic melancholy.

Yet to be ideal is to be inhuman, as the protagonist realizes; he says that this woman is “not a person but an idea of a person, trapped in a temple for all time” (127). This is the result when the impossible melancholic dream is actually realized, and the denigrated self cast away: perfection, peace, and *loneliness*. The ideal does not mean freedom – it just means another box to fit into, another form of entrapment. The protagonist recognizes the terrifying inhumanity, and the sense of revulsion that he feels reminds him of his own ties to reality:

I've got my own mother to take care of, a flesh-and-blood mother, an imperfect but present tense mother and maybe it's just a rationalization, but for the first time in a while, I am reminded that I am needed, I have obligations to people. (127)

He runs from *The Woman My Mother Should Have Been*, and eventually ends up in a familiar place – in his own memories. Finally, the protagonist embarks on the same foray into the past that his clients do, except that he understands his role as simply an *observer*, sifting through painful recollections without any hope of fixing them. All of his memories reveal moments in which the protagonist is unable to assimilate, the events that have conditioned him, even before his father's disappearance, to fear failure like a sickness.

It is at this point that he reopens the book and discovers the truth – his father has left him a clue to his whereabouts. We see the possibility of reconciling the book's central conflict, the protagonist's search for his father. But the looming threat of death interrupts – the protagonist is almost out of book, about to return to the hangar, where his past self will shoot him. The realization that a resolution is just out of reach is, understandably, a frustrating one:

How many times have I gone around this loop, refusing to move forward?

How much of my life have I spent cycling through these events, trying to learn from them...What is this called, what I am doing, to myself, to my life, this wallowing, this pondering, this rolling over and over in the same places of my memory, wearing them thin, wearing them out? Why don't I ever learn? Why don't I ever do anything different?

Do I always open the package too late?

Is the loop always the same?

Will I ever figure it out in time, early enough to actually do something about it?

Of course I do. Of course it is. Of course I won't. (206-7)

The loop is already set; there is no changing it. Ultimately, there is no escape from melancholia, a fact that is manifested in the protagonist's hypochondriac awareness of his own death. The injury is always self-inflicted, set in place by the laws of the science fictional universe, parallel to the racial melancholic's internalization of pain and failure. Danger is inescapable. So – *is* there a way to live safely?

The answer: most likely not. Every attempt that the protagonist makes to escape, to protect himself, ends in failure. So, in the last moments before he meets his past self, he makes a choice:

I can allow the events of my life to happen to me.

Or I can take those very same actions and make them my own. I can live in my own present, risk failure, be assured of failure.

From the outside, these two choices would look identical. Would *be* identical, in fact. Either way, my life will turn out the same. Either way, there will come a time when I will lose everything. The difference is, I can choose to do that, I can choose to live that way, to live with purpose, live with intention. (218)

The protagonist realizes the inevitability of melancholia, and attempts to claim it as his own. Cheng identifies racial melancholia “both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection” (Cheng 20) – the protagonist is consciously and *intentionally* applying the second part. Knowing that he is locked into a structure that allows no escape, he copes by reclaiming that failure as his own. Not that this actually makes any difference, in terms of action:

All of which is just dandy and fuzzy and self-affirming, except that none of it solves the problem, which is that I am still the asshole who shot myself the first time around, which is to say, I'll always be the asshole who shoots myself, or to put it another way, he's about to shoot me and there's nothing I can do about it because there's nothing I did do about it.

(Yu 226-7)

Nevertheless, there is something valuable in understanding this melancholia, this inevitable outcome of pain. The importance is in the subtle difference between being a hapless victim of melancholia, and being a conscious creator and consumer of one's own melancholia.

For Yu, this manifests in narrative. *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, the book-within-the-book, is produced in the face of a hypochondriac anticipation of death. The protagonist simultaneously reads and produces a narrative – he is literally revisiting, understanding, and thus creating his own path. As is every melancholic, armed with their own time machines, revisiting points of pain, trying to make sense of the dangerous present, trying desperately to *understand*.

Conclusion: This Book is a Time Machine

With self-referential humor, Yu suggests that writing a story is, in and of itself, the construction of a “universal time machine”:

It is possible, in principle, to construct a universal time machine from no other components than (i) a piece of paper that is moved in two directions through a recording element, backward and forward, which (ii) performs

only two basic operations, narration and the straightforward application of the past tense. (34)

The implication here is twofold: (a) The protagonist, in simultaneously reading and transcribing *How to Live Safely*, the book-within-the-book, is both using and making a time machine; and (b) Yu, in writing *How to Live Safely*, the actual book, is creating a time machine as well. Yu-the-protagonist and Yu-the-author are simultaneously revisiting, recounting, and reinscribing sites of racial pain. They are using their universal time machines to enact the melancholic process of fixating on a point of grief.

Metaphysically confusing? Certainly. But consider the fact that Yu is using the science fictional genre to retell the immigrant narrative. He is mapping racial melancholia onto a science fictional narrative, the protagonist of which, in turn, inscribes racial melancholia not only onto his own book, but also onto the science fictional universe in which he lives. In this way, racial melancholia is not simply an affliction, but a reclaimed literary technique, which can be used to interact with and change the dominant genre.

Chapter 3: Aliens and Alterity in “Story of Your Life”

Introduction: Reimagining Difference

So far, my primary texts have facilitated my reading and analysis through easily recognizable racial markers: Ken Liu’s “The Man Who Ended History” explicitly refers to Japan, China, and America as major players in the story, while Charles Yu frames *How to Live Safely* as an immigrant narrative, albeit one cleverly clothed in the trappings of science fiction.

Ted Chiang’s “Story of Your Life,” however, offers no such traction. As a self-identified Asian American author, Chiang is actually known for not addressing race and racial issues in his stories. In an interview with the Asian American Writer’s Workshop, Chiang explains his refusal to write about race:

I’m hesitant about making my protagonists Asian Americans because I’m wary of readers trying to interpret my stories as being about race when they aren’t. People have looked for a racial subtext in my work in a way I don’t think they would have if my family name were Davis or Miller. This is just a special case of something most writers have to contend with – people reading their work in a certain light based on extra-textual knowledge of the author – but I’d rather not do anything to encourage it if I can avoid it.

To call “Story of Your Life” an Asian American story just because the writer is Asian American would be engaging in a highly questionable act of literary racial profiling. But the story makes no reference to race, let alone specifically to Asian Americans. So, can “Story of Your Life” be called an Asian American story at all?

Here, I return to the history addressed in my introductory chapter. The term “Asian American” first came about as a unifying moniker for a political movement. It marked a push for ethnic studies, a discipline that aims to examine racial difference outside the terms of a hegemonic, white perspective.

Difference is the key term. In his book *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American*, Min Hyoung Song examines the implications of an Asian American author who does not write about race:

It may be that by avoiding ethnic literature, with its all-too-familiar trappings, all of these writers are actively seeking alternative ways of thinking about difference and hence about race. (Song 84)

Ethnic literature, as Song points out, comes with a heavy set of expectations. We are a society hypersensitive to difference, highly susceptible to prejudice, and most comfortable with the familiar. With each new text that we read, whether consciously or not, we grasp at clues that will link the work back to the familiar – typically, to our canon.

This is not an inherently bad reading tactic; it is simply our way of grounding narrative in our understanding of reality. However, we must also remember that when it comes to English literature, canon is not, and has never been, an even playing field. Popular consciousness of English canon is *highly* skewed towards works written by cisgendered and heterosexual white males of the upper class; narratives written by people who fall outside of those categories are often less well-known, and far fewer in number.

As a result, ethnic literature runs the very real risk of being pigeonholed into a set of familiar, stereotypical tropes. What Song argues for, and what Chiang employs, is a

new way of writing about race – by *not* writing about race. Instead, the topic addressed is *difference*, a broader term that is less specifically loaded, but which can be applied to a variety of categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality. The key to this interpretation, then, lies not with the writer, but with the *reader*.

I make this point, not necessarily as a postmodernist debunking of authorial authority, but to emphasize the difference between an Asian American text, and an Asian American *reading* of a text. Personally, I only understood the distinction once I realized that “Story of Your Life” is, fundamentally, a tale about *difference in perspective*, and that I could read the text as discussing difference as *race*, without Chiang ever specifically using such terms.

“An Incurious Bunch”: Subverting the Alien Encounter Trope

A summary of “Story of Your Life” is relatively simple. After an alien species makes contact with Earth, linguist Louise Banks is hired by the United States government to converse with and learn from the aliens. In the course of learning the aliens’ language, Louise gains the ability to see the future.

Chiang structures “Story of Your Life” non-linearly, weaving two storylines together. One storyline is Louise’s life as she learns from the aliens (called “heptapods” due to their seven-limbed shape); the other consists of scenes from her daughter’s life, interspersed at thematically resonant intervals. It is Louise’s new ability to see the future that allows her to narrate the story in this way: before any of these events even occur, she glimpses her future marriage, the conception and birth of her daughter, her divorce – and

her daughter's death at the age of twenty-five. Thus, the two narratives are interlinked; ultimately, it is the story of Louise's daughter's life.

As the title and my brief synopsis may indicate, "Story of Your Life" is not a traditional alien encounter story. In *Contesting Genres*, Betsy Huang writes that "Chiang steers clear of the macrotext of alien encounters, which typically consists of a requisite struggle for dominance between aliens and humans" (107).

The genealogy of alien encounter stories can be traced back to the early twentieth century – with immigration and World War I weighing heavily on everyone's minds, American science fiction reflected anxieties over foreign influence and invasion. In *Astounding Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America*, John Cheng draws a specific parallel between concerns regarding "Yellow Peril" and the portrayal of literal alien creatures. In interwar America, "alien" had not yet seen common use in science fiction, but the perception of Asians as "inassimilable aliens" – a perception that continues today with the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype – provided fruitful inspiration for science fiction authors. Cheng writes:

The familiar difference of race, specifically the emergent category of Asian, provided a resonant reference for these alien associations and offered additional thematic expression and resolution to modern concerns about science, technology, and their social consequence and implication.

(Cheng 177)

Given this historical context, it is easy to see why so many alien encounter narratives carry overtones of imperialism and xenophobia – the horror of a literal alien invasion reflects fear of a *racial* alien invasion.

Despite the premise of alien contact, “Story of Your Life” circumvents the trope almost entirely. Chiang acknowledges the trope at several points, only to discount it – the character Colonel Weber, for example, is an archetypical military figure, inherently suspicious of the heptapods’ motives and wary of providing too much information to them. His fears, though, are never realized – Louise, who gets over the heptapods’ alienness fairly quickly, says:

We regularly asked the heptapods why they had come. Each time, they answered “to see,” or “to observe.” Indeed, sometimes they preferred to watch us silently rather than answer our questions. Perhaps they were scientists, perhaps they were tourists...the heptapods never asked questions about anything. Whether scientists or tourists, they were an awfully incurious bunch. (Chiang 114)

This detached, intellectual wish to simply observe is perhaps why the heptapods and the scientists seem to get along so well. There is only the desire to learn for knowledge’s sake, rather than as a way to gain the upper hand.

Weber, after seeing that the heptapods are not necessarily violent, attempts to impose an information barter system that proves unsuccessful, as the heptapods do not possess a concept of “trade value.” Louise refers to their exchanges as “gift-giving,” and states, “I didn’t want the heptapods to give us new technology, because I didn’t want to see what our governments might do with it” (142), giving a clear anti-violence stance.

In the end, all that is exchanged between the humans and the heptapods is a *difference in perception* – the scientists are largely dedicated to discovering how the heptapods approach science, history, and language, and how that approach differs from

the humans'. There is no significantly new information exchanged, as they are largely discussing the same principles. The government, focused on how the heptapods can help them gain power, ultimately finds this information useless.

“Story of Your Life” meets and subverts the alien encounter trope by simply *not letting it happen*. Alien encounter stories tend to portray aliens as either primitive savages or futuristic horrors – analogous to real-world fears about racial aliens – but the heptapods are neither. They are simply *different*.

If we see science fiction as a space in which real-world concerns can be acted out, then “Story of Your Life” provides an interesting anti-imperialist scenario. In a world that is rapidly globalizing, real-life aliens are much closer than they once were, prompting anxieties that echo interwar concerns. Chiang’s vision provides a more ethical mode of perception that encourages us to see these aliens not as looming threats to be defeated or potential resources to be mined, but simply as *different*.

Negotiating the Double Bind

In *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, known for her defining work in postcolonial studies, expresses a radical reorientation in her thinking. For Spivak, the easy binaries of tradition-modernity and colonial-postcolonial are no longer sufficient tools for interpreting the globalized present. Instead, she argues that an aesthetic education – that is, an engagement with artistic works – is the last instrument available for implementing global justice and democracy. To this end, Spivak seeks to educate students in negotiating what she calls the “double

bind,” a term adapted from anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

In its most simple terms, the double bind is a dilemma in communication: an individual receives two conflicting messages, which negate each other. To respond successfully to one is to fail the other – there is no way for the individual to be right. When the individual cannot confront the dilemma, and is incapable of resolving or opting out, the double bind arises. Spivak frames the double bind in terms of what she calls “radical alterity,” and states:

To be born human is to be born angled toward an other and others. To account for this the human being presupposes the quite-other...By definition, we cannot – no self can – reach the quite-other. Thus the ethical situation can only be figured in the ethical experience of the impossible. (97-8)

This description of alterity and the double bind seems somewhat related to Anne Cheng’s theory of racial melancholia, discussed in previous chapters – however, Spivak is wary of psychoanalysis, and instead chooses to focus on possible negotiations of this double bind, casting it as productive rather than painful. Largely preoccupied with the concept of language and translation, Spivak calls for a “rethinking of comparativism,” which starts with

the admission that as language, languages are equivalent, and that deep language learning must implode into a simulacrum of lingual memory.

We must wait for this implosion, which we sense after the fact, or, perhaps, others sense in us, and we thus enter into a relationship with the

language that is rather different from the position of a comparer, a charter of influence, who supposedly occupies a place above the linguistic traditions to be compared. (472)

This is a new mode of thinking beyond the simple polarities of colonial-postcolonial, which casts language in hierarchical, relational roles. By viewing the languages as equivalent, it becomes possible to engage in “the training of the imagination that can teach the subject to play – an aesthetic education” (10) – in other words, a negotiation of the double bind, by simultaneously occupying two seemingly contradictory subject positions rather than viewing one from the other.

I draw attention to Spivak’s double bind in particular because of her interest in language, which reflects the linguistic themes prevalent in “Story of Your Life.” Chiang makes an effort to privilege linguistic difference over physical difference: despite the heptapods’ strange appearances – radially symmetric and seven-armed, with seven lidless eyes – we learn that “humans were more [biologically] similar to the heptapods than any other species they’d [the heptapods] ever encountered” (Chiang 142). Though not a ringing endorsement of any common ancestry, this statement nevertheless implies an argument against social Darwinism, and thus against the idea of racial difference on a biological basis. Historically, the racial alien has been defined as “different” primarily through physical appearance – which is extrapolated out to biological differences – and language. Because Chiang chooses to have Louise narrate “Story of Your Life,” rather than one of the other scientists, the heptapods’ biological differences take a backseat to their *linguistic* differences.

Additionally, it must be noted that Louise focuses primarily on the *written* language, rather than the spoken. The structural difference between human and heptapod vocal cords mean that humans will never be capable of organically producing heptapod speech; however, it is possible for them to become quite proficient in the heptapods' written language, thus allowing the two languages to stand on equivalent terms. Louise designates speech and writing as Heptapod A and Heptapod B respectively, as they are distinct from one another – Heptapod B is not glottographic, but semasiographic.⁶

Over time, Louise's immersion in the language enables her to experience both human and heptapod modes of perception – “one causal and the other teleological” (133). We might interpret this as Chiang's interpretation of “lingual memory,” brought into sharper contrast through the use of an alien encounter. In the following passage, Louise describes being able to occupy both positions:

Usually, Heptapod B affects just my memory: my consciousness crawls along as it did before, a glowing sliver crawling forward in time, the difference being that the ash of memory lies ahead as well as behind: there is no real combustion. But occasionally I have glimpses where Heptapod B truly reigns, and I experience past and future all at once; my consciousness becomes a half-century-long ember burning outside time. I perceive – during those glimpses – that entire epoch as a simultaneity. It's

⁶ “Glottographic” writing refers to a writing system that represents speech. For example, in written English, each letter corresponds to a spoken sound. “Semasiographic” writing conveys meaning without reference to speech – in her analysis of “Story of Your Life,” Betsy Huang draws attention to written Chinese, a system of writing that relies on ideograms, and where separate components do not correspond to particular sounds.

a period encompassing the rest of my life, and the entirety of yours. (140-1)

Because Louise's memory stretches both ahead and behind, she frequently mixes tenses in peculiar ways, such as saying "I remember a conversation we'll have" (107). Her shifts in perspective are a kind of aesthetic "play" in the style of Spivak – she makes no value or emotional judgments in favor of one or the other, accepting that "neither one [is] disqualifiable no matter how much context [is] available" (133-4). This thought is embodied in the story's "double helix-like" form, where the two modes of narration alternate while also informing one another – Louise, and by extension the reader, is able to occupy both subject positions.

It is through occupying both perspectives that Louise's double bind is revealed. Though the human and heptapod perspectives are cast as equally valid, they are still different and oppositional. The human mode of consciousness is sequential, and allows for the perception of free will to exist; meanwhile, the heptapod mode of consciousness is *simultaneous*, so that past, present, and future can be seen all at once. Ultimately, these two principles – freedom of choice, and knowledge of the future – cannot coexist, a fact that Louise must come to terms with once she is able to occupy both positionalities:

Knowledge of the future was incompatible with free will. What made it possible for me to exercise freedom of choice also made it impossible for me to know the future. Conversely, now that I know the future, I would never act contrary to that future, including telling others what I know: those who know the future don't talk about it. (137).

Early in the story, we learn that Louise's daughter dies at twenty-five, the victim of a car crash. Louise herself knows that it will happen, through her knowledge of Heptapod B. What we understand as "free will" would be Louise being able to change her actions and thus avert future tragedy – however, as Chiang points out, the two are incompatible. Louise knows the future, which means that she will perform the actions necessary to reach that future. Her double bind is that she cannot both exercise freedom of choice and know the future.

The human consciousness, seeing the world in a "chronological causal interpretation of events" (129), would seek to alter some action in order to prevent an unfavorable outcome. To know that outcome, however, would necessitate a heptapod viewpoint – and heptapods view actions as "meaningful only over a period of time" (130). Being able to see all events simultaneously, they are concerned not with causality, but with a "minimizing, maximizing purpose" (134).

Being a human with limited fluency in Heptapod B, Louise understands both views. She knows where causality may be perceived – her work with the heptapods is what allows her to meet her husband, which eventually leads to marriage, to the conception of a child, and ends, ultimately, in her daughter's death. Yet it is also her work with the heptapods that enables her to see the future, to know that this is the path that she will take, and, most importantly, to glimpse the underlying purpose. The nonlinear structure of "Story of Your Life" disrupts our normal understanding of events as causal, and reveals Louise's second double bind, a preoccupation with purpose: she wonders whether she is "working toward an extreme of joy, or of pain... a minimum, or a maximum" (145).

Chiang does not give us a definite answer to this question, but he does not need to. To choose between any of the pairings – human or heptapod, causal or teleological, free will or future knowledge, joy or pain – would prioritize one choice over another, and destroy the sense of “play” within the double bind. Instead, Louise embodies Spivak’s idea of comparativism; she makes no choice, but inhabits both, allowing each to inform the other. She stands in the meditative balance, negotiating her double bind with grace, playing with it through the productive act of narration.

Conclusion: “Story of Your Life” and an Asian American Reading

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote *An Aesthetic Education* in the context of a rapidly globalizing world, in which contact with human aliens and their cultures was becoming more common than ever. Ted Chiang takes Spivak’s view of globalization a step further – he envisions a world in which we are so globalized, we have actually extended *beyond* Earth, and made contact with non-human life forms. In this vision, he evokes a literary tradition of using extraterrestrial aliens as an analog for real-life aliens, in which we can read new ways of negotiating difference.

In this way, “Story of Your Life” depicts a way of imagining difference that is ultimately productive. The seemingly oppositional, disparate elements within the story are ultimately shown to be parts of the same whole: the human and heptapod consciousnesses are different but equally valid ways of interpreting the same events, and are equally important to telling “Story of Your Life.” Even the novella’s form demonstrates this principle – Chiang strikes a delicate balance between Louise’s more academic tale of linguistic exploration, and the pathos-driven account of her daughter

growing up. The storylines revolve around one another, alternating and intertwining, as Betsy Huang writes, “double helix-like” (108). In the end, they create the same story, the “story of your life.” One cannot be understood without the other; neither is superior.

The alien has always walked among us. Throughout the years, it has taken on different forms, but we can understand it in its most basic definition: the Other. Chiang imagines a world in which we can interact with the Other without resorting to historical practices of imperial violence, or to an Orientalist fascination with the Other’s knowledge. To do this, Spivak writes, both the dominant and the subordinate must rethink their positionalities in the interest of a more just modernity, and understand what can be learned from the other:

I need to learn from you what you practice; I need it even if you didn’t want to share a bit of my pie; but there’s something I want to give you, which will make our shared practice flourish. (347)

As “Asian American fiction” becomes a broader and broader term, taking on new and different forms, we can consider what kind of influence Asian American writers bring to their respective genres, and not just how the genres affect these writers. This gives us room to negotiate the double bind between a white-dominated Anglophone megatext and narratives of the racialized Other – there is space to occupy both perspectives, to play with an aesthetic intermingling, and to produce a text that simultaneously borrows from and rejuvenates its source material.

Conclusion

In August 2012, the Asian American Literary Review began a series of interviews, spotlighting four young Asian American writers of speculative fiction.

AALR's website gives the following description of these writers:

All under 45, these writers have amassed numerous major science fiction and literary award nominations and awards – evidence of their ability to bridge the parallel universes of speculative and mainstream literatures. Their work differs radically, ranging from peculiar fables to intricate meditations on the relationship between humans and technology. But taken together, that work exemplifies the kind of intersectionist worldview that shifts conventionalized perceptions, encouraging us to think across traditional social and literary categories.

The four writers were: Ken Liu, E. Lily Yu, Charles Yu, and Ted Chiang. Out of the four, E. Lily Yu is the only woman – and the only one that I did not write about in this paper. Of the four, E. Lily Yu is the youngest – her website lists her as a recent graduate of Princeton University and a first-year doctoral student at Cornell – so her body of work is somewhat smaller, most of her stories shorter and less conducive to literary analysis, particularly my rather specific topic. Nevertheless, I have felt her absence, as well as the absence of myriad other voices.

It has not escaped my notice that the three authors I chose for this thesis are all cisgendered, heterosexual, East Asian American men with advanced degrees. I chose them because of their prominence within the rather small pool of Asian Americans writing speculative fiction – but this has its problems. Within the unifying category of

“Asian American,” there has always existed a problematic ethnic hierarchy. The genre has tended to privilege the narratives of Chinese and Japanese American authors – who tend to occupy a higher socioeconomic class – while marginalizing stories told by Filipino and South and Southeast Asian American authors. This ethnic hierarchy, coupled with the fact that science fiction is still ruled by a fairly rigid set of genre conventions, means that the pool of Asian American science fiction writers is small, their prominence determined, at least partially, by social privilege.

I don't say this to cast aspersions on these writers' talent. They are all uniquely skilled and deserve the praise that they have received, and their contributions make me hopeful for the future of Asian American writers in science fiction. But I feel it is necessary to continue to question who *isn't* being represented. Whose narrative voice has not been acknowledged by publishers and prize-givers, our literary tastemakers?

My hope is that, over time, more and more Asian American writers will make their way in science fiction, as well as other genres, questioning and reworking the Asian American narrative to fit the diversity inherent in the term “Asian American.” I am not sure how long this will take, but I am excited to see it happen. Perhaps I will even attempt to undertake the task myself. It seems like the next logical step, and after all, I have time.

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