theories and methodologies

Viet Thanh Nguyen and the Scholar–Public Intellectual

MIN HYOUNG SONG

VIET THANH NGUYEN'S RECENT SUCCESSES MIGHT APPEAR TO HAVE COME OUT OF NOWHERE. BEFORE *THE SYMPATHIZER* WON THE PULITZER Prize and *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* was long-listed for the National Book Award, and before he was named a MacArthur Fellow, Nguyen was another hardworking academic, laboring away in a field that no one outside it knew much about. For those who labored alongside him in the same field, the story looks different. When many of us were finishing graduate school and looking for our first teaching jobs, there was a joke going around that all the applicants on the market that year were waiting to find out what Nguyen would do. He had gotten all the job offers in the field, and the other top contenders were hanging out on the waiting list. His first book, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002), a study of how the idea of resistance circulates in critical discussions of Asian American literature, landed with a splash, becoming one of those works other scholars had to be familiar with. What made it stand out was his insistence that we not idealize resistance. If the standard story that scholars liked to tell was that Asian American literature adopted a radical posture when it came to race, seeking to critique racism and to conjure alternative social possibilities, Nguyen pointed out that the story was incomplete. Asian Americans, including creative writers, are as heterogeneous ideology-wise as they are heterogeneous in every other way.

I like to think of Nguyen's *Race and Resistance* as marking a kind of maturity in the field of Asian American literary studies. Beginning in the early eighties, when scholars of Asian American literature sought a foothold in the academy, they had a lot to prove. For a start, they had to show that studying literature by Asian Americans was a worthwhile academic pursuit; this was part of a larger struggle that involved arguing that the study of anything related to Asian Americans was worthwhile. As one version of this argument went, although Asian Americans were only a small fraction of the total United States population and were always thought of, if at all, as perennial foreign-

MIN HYOUNG SONG is professor of English at Boston College, where he directs the Asian American Studies Program. He is the author, most recently, of *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Duke UP, 2013), which received several awards, and a coeditor of *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature* (Cambridge UP, 2015). He is at work on a book manuscript about climate change, aesthetics, and race.

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ers, members of a model minority, and easily assimilated (the contradictions between these characterizations were not lost on scholars), they played pivotal roles in American history, were crucial to understanding how race and capitalism danced around each other, and had made many contributions to American letters in ways that were hard to track because a writer of Asian origin would flare into view only to be forgotten.

One scholar making a version of this argument in the early eighties, Elaine Kim, uncovered a large corpus of previously ignored writings to show how much Asian Americans had been writing and how ambitious their writings had been. King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi published an annotated bibliography in 1986 that further demonstrated the breadth of this corpus, while in the early nineties Amy Ling, alongside white feminist scholars like Elizabeth Ammons (my thesis adviser) and Annette White-Parks, made a case for the foundational importance of the early-twentieth-century Chinese North American writer Sui Sin Far, the pen name of Edith Maude Eaton. Cynthia Sau-Ling Wong later added theoretical sophistication to readings of this literature, and the range and ambition of Asian American scholarship grew throughout the nineties and early aughts in the work of scholars like Lisa Lowe, Susan Koshy, David Palumbo-Liu, Patricia Y. Chu, and Kandice Chuh. Rajini Srikanth and Lavina Dhingra Shankar edited a volume that asked where South Asian Americans fit into a field that had been dominated by Americans of East Asian descent. From then, scholarship on the Filipino diaspora and Southeast Asian Americans grew alongside scholarship on South Asian Americans. Recent collected volumes of essays—like *Keywords for Asian American Studies* (edited by Cathy J. Schlund-Vials et al.), *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature* (edited by Rachel Lee), *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature* (edited by Rajini Srikanth and myself), and *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature* (edited by Daniel Kim and Crystal Parikh)—can be understood as the completion of a phase of this project.

The nineties and early aughts were an exciting time to be working in Asian American literary studies. Scholars embraced theory, made a transnational turn that sought to understand Asian Americans as part of a diaspora rather than as immigrants, and witnessed a proliferation of new writings by Asian Americans, many of whom began to find large readerships and win official praise. The pressure to say Asian American literature deserves to be studied eased (without ever going away), and in its place was the question of what constitutes an "Asian American" and what it means for the study of Asian American literature to be now so contained by the kinds of institutions its practitioners had sought to revolutionize. *Race and Resistance* entered critical discussion at this moment, when the excitement of the nineties gave way to the more sober aughts, asking its readers to consider whether revolution was ever the sole, or even the dominant, goal of the writers we studied. In doing so, the book pinpoints a moment of "crisis," during which the "tacit assumption that, regardless of ethnic or other divisions, Asian America at least had ideological common ground" proved to be untrue. "We can only hope," it concludes, "that crisis will force Asian American intellectuals to determine new strategies that are not completely or finally dependent upon racial identity as a vehicle of long-term social change" (171).

Since publishing these words in 2002, Nguyen has decided to realize the hope he had expressed. It took him longer than a decade, but during this time he found opportunities to change the way he wrote and thought in order to discover the "new strategies" he had written about. This meant, in part, unlearning habits of academic writing and thinking more deliberately about how to reach a

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broader readership. In a recent book of essays whose authors all seek to offer provocations to the field of Asian American studies, Nguyen writes about his passion for both Asian America and theory, as well as his gradual disillusionment: "as a graduate student and assistant professor, I gave in to the scholarly work, first willingly and excitedly, then grudgingly and with resignation, and finally with hopelessness" ("Becoming Bilingual" 302). Nguyen may well be speaking for many of us, both in and out of Asian American studies, who went to graduate school in search of something different from a professional degree or a dive straight into the job market. Graduate school was—at least for me—an opportunity to look at the world as it is without flinching and to imagine the world anew as a better place that we could all discover together. Specializing in the study of Asian American literature was one way to strive for these goals. This is a hopeless idealism that the business of higher education is often quick to beat flat. We scholars of Asian American literature, directly benefitting from years of race-based social organizing and political struggle, made a bid for legitimation in the academy in the hopes that we could transform it. In the process, Nguyen argues, it disciplined us. As he observes, "Asian American studies also inadvertently proved that it was another manifestation of the model minority, theorizing like white people and with their authority, speaking in their language even as it tries to make that language its own" (304).

There's a moment in *The Sympathizer* when Nguyen signals a break from—or is it a break for?—the field. The narrator explains to the Auteur, as he calls the famous director who is making a movie that looks a lot like *Apocalypse Now*, how the Vietnamese scream:

> So let me just point out that in your script, you have my people scream the following way: *AIIIEEEEE!* For example, when VILLAGER #3 is impaled by a Viet Cong punji trap, this is how he screams. . . . But having heard many of my countrymen screaming in pain, I can assure you this is not how we scream. . . . Here's what it sounds like, I said, reaching across the desk to pick up the Auteur's Montblanc fountain pen. I wrote onomatopoeically across the front page of the screenplay in big black letters: *AIEYAAHHH!!!* (127)

The scream, as the Auteur writes it, is also the title of a famous early anthology of Asian American literature, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shaw Wong. Its title, *Aiiieeeee!*, was meant to emulate the scream of early Chinese, Japanese, and (to a lesser extent) Filipino immigrants, angry and defiant and demanding to be heard. When the narrator insists on an alternative rendering of the Vietnamese scream, he is rebuking one way of thinking about Asian Americans and the literature they have created. In its place, there is something else as inchoate but still demanding to be heard. Who, then, is the Auteur? Surely, he stands in for Francis Ford Coppola, the director of *Apocalypse Now*, and for the many like him who have belittled the experiences of Asians and Asian Americans as exotic and other. But the Auteur could also be understood as the scholars who have founded in *Aiiieeeee!* a literary tradition that excludes—since it focuses on East Asian Americans and the construction of a largely masculine canon—as much as it gives voice to the previously silent. He might represent, as well, the forces of conformity and the deadening of creativity that Nguyen associates with the contemporary university.

Like the story of resistance, the story of co-optation has gained ground in the field. As a result, many scholars have turned to critiquing the facts of our complicity with a system we abhor. Such scholars began, in the early years of the new century, to find racism at work where we could and to make our work relevant, confronting the institutional forces that acted as a horizon of the thinkable. Some of this work could feel rote, and a lot of it looked like the kind of scholarship Nguyen

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was seeking to upend, but much of it was well-researched and original and strove to say something important. I have, for instance, learned much from the courageous work of scholars of South Asian America, such as Srikanth, Sunaina Maira, Junaid Rana, and Jasbir Puar. Laboring in the shadow of 9/11, they wrote, and are continuing to write, with urgency about the immediate social context that has led them to embrace a wider solidarity with people from the Middle East. I have also learned much from scholars like Martin Manalansan, Augusto Espiritu, Vincente Rafael, Nerissa Balce, and Christine Balance, who have explored the transnational and historic ties between the United States and the Philippines. Their research has gained new relevance in the midst of President Duterte's brutal "war on drugs." For many scholars interested in Southeast Asian Americans, such as Schlund-Vials, Lan Duong, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Yến Lê Espiritu, Karin Aguilar–San Juan, and of course Nguyen, what matters is the experience not of immigration but of the refugee. They too speak with urgency about what has been left out of discussions about Asian America as a primarily East Asian–centered phenomenon and what has brought Asian American studies into greater potential solidarity with the millions of people around the world who are now being forced from their homes.

Like Nguyen, what I too "love about Asian American studies and the Asian American culture that has been influenced by it—and vice versa—is the sense of duty, service, community, solidarity, and justice" ("Becoming Bilingual" 307). Maybe it's this passion for what Asian American studies represents that has led Nguyen not to give up on scholarship. His successes depend not only on his fiction writing (his collection of stories, *Refugees*, which dazzles in the range of characters its author inhabits and the complexity of the plots that enmesh them, deserves as much attention as *The Sympathizer*) but also on his scholarly book about the war in Vietnam and memory. A hybrid of memoir, careful literary interpretation, and theorizing, *Nothing Ever Dies* draws readers into arguments that are often difficult to understand. Reflecting current trends in the field, it calls attention to the inhuman at the base of contemporary invocations of the human: "But even as tolerant, humanistic societies have called for equality and human rights, they have never found a shortage of inhuman others to justify war and violence" (72). Hence, he observes, "When we say *always remember* and *never forget*, we usually mean to always remember and never forget what was done to us or our friends and allies. Of the terrible things we have done or condoned, the less said and the less remembered the better" (73). The call to focus on the inhuman—the "terrible things we have done or condoned"—echoes Juliana Chang's observation that "humanist ideology is already permeated by inhuman means and ends" (11).

There is one more kink in the story I am trying to tell. Something else was happening to the academy during the years in which Nguyen was developing as a creative writer. Higher education was increasingly thought of as a business, states began to pull funding from their public universities, fees and tuition rose out of proportion to the rate of inflation, and students were encouraged to think of their education as an investment. All of this had been going on for a long time, but during the last fifteen years or so the process seems to have accelerated, especially after 2008 and the financial crisis. The message to students has become deafening: to make the mounting expense of a college education worthwhile, you must major in something that will lead to a lucrative career. One consequence of this message has been the declining number of students majoring in the humanities and the related phenomenon of an ever-slimmer MLA *Job Information List*.

These macro-level events have been devastating for the study of literature as a whole,

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but they may contain one very small silver lining. Lee Konstantinou, speaking recently on a panel about the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, said the review was created as a response to the crisis of the job market and the precarity of contingent faculty members. Many highly trained graduate students in the humanities struggling to find full-time academic employment began to look for, and eventually helped found, platforms where a different kind of intellectual labor could flourish. Less able to write scholarship for peers in the same field, they turned to writing for a larger audience of highly educated but nonspecialized readers and to speaking more directly about why what they study matters. This, of course, does little to solve the problem of contingency, but it does represent the departure Nguyen had yearned for from the stale norms of the academy.

I want to understand Nguyen's many successes in the past two years as part of a changing profession. No longer can we in the academy speak primarily to each other. The way we write—or at least a lot of what we write—should be accessible. Creativity, experimentation, and different ways of engaging with the public should be encouraged. These emerging trends, already well underway in some quarters, have long been a motivating force behind the development of Asian American studies, and they continue to be an enlivening ideal for the field. It should be no surprise, therefore, that many Asian American studies scholars have made a concerted effort to do exactly what Nguyen has done. Minh-Ha T. Pham and Mimi Thi Nguyen started a popular blog, now discontinued, about race and fashion while they were graduate students, and they have since gone on to have impressive academic careers, publishing, respectively, the monographs *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging* and *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*. Pham has also published in more mainstream venues like *The Atlantic*. Hua Hsu is a celebrated author of scholarship, most notably *A Floating Chinaman: Fantasy and Failure across the Pacific*, and public writings, which regularly appear in *The New Yorker*. Meanwhile, Oliver Wang, a sociologist by training, reviews albums on National Public Radio and writes original scholarship about topics like the Filipino mobile DJ scene in the Bay Area of the eighties. Jane Hu, a graduate student, is also a contributor to *The New Yorker*. There are many more examples, but it's clear that numerous Asian American studies scholars have sought to reach a wider audience with their scholarship while remaining a part of the academy, and in many cases they have succeeded.

It's my hope that Nguyen's many recent successes, all of them well deserved, will accelerate an ongoing effort in Asian American studies, as well as in the humanities and social sciences at large, to be less insular, to reach a wider audience, and to found platforms that better communicate why scholarship continues to matter. Maybe we are seeing in Nguyen's visibility the rise of something we might call the scholar–public intellectual: someone who belongs to the collaborative, and laborious, effort to advance knowledge about topics that do not always have immediate widespread interest and who, at the same time, works to make the results of this kind of effort legible to a broader audience. This is not a new figure, but Nguyen may be helping to revitalize it.

In saying this, I want to emphasize some concerns that shouldn't be glossed over. Let me, then, end with a Sedgewickian list:

1. Tenure-stream faculty members are already struggling with a steady erosion of their numbers in favor of contingent faculty members. Does a move toward a scholar–public intellectual model create yet another item that graduate students must add to an already overloaded curriculum vitae? Is writing for a broader audience

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another requirement for landing the ever-more-elusive tenure-stream job and then getting tenure? And, if so, does the public outreach undertaken by a growing number of scholar–public intellectuals help to strengthen claims about the importance of the work that full-time tenure-stream faculty members perform, or does it contribute to the decline in their numbers, as the barrier to entry grows ever higher?

2. Given the eroding numbers of tenure-stream faculty, how much should Asian American studies, and other forms of study focused on people of color, worry about the weakening of the tenure system? Is this a case of arriving late to the party? Just as the faculty members of color show up, the party starts to wind down and all the drama and crises spin out of control. It's up to us, then, to try to clean up the mess or, given how bad the situation is, to turn out the lights. Or is there already something fundamentally flawed about the academy, so what's important is for faculty members of color, whose numbers haven't actually been going up, to take what resources they can get and share them more broadly? Is it time, in other words, that we insist that we are "in but not of" the university (Moten and Harney 101)?
3. Several years ago, at the end of a master's seminar, I gave a candid talk about the many challenges facing the professoriat. In response, the students demanded I give them something positive to think about. I said to them with a great sense of the inadequacy of what I was offering that, given how bright and well trained they were, it made sense that they were still going to have the advantage of the education they had already received and could, agitated by the constraints of the job market, create new modes of intellectual engagement and new spheres of public discourse. Something like this may already have begun with the advent of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Public Books*, *N+1*, *The New Inquiry*, and *Jacobin*. Do these platforms enable young scholars who feel as unhappy as Nguyen did to find an outlet that might allow them to become public figures and to receive their accolades? Can these platforms foster the kind of intellectual work that Asian American studies has explicitly sought to enable, or do they replicate outside the academy the same kind of racial dynamics one finds within it?
4. Is fame a good goal for the scholar–public intellectual? By this I mean not only to recall the fact that very few will ever become as famous as Nguyen but also to highlight a tension within the category I am, tentatively, offering. To be a scholar, one has to conduct arduous research, constantly work with others engaged in the same activities, and struggle with questions that have limited appeal beyond a small group. This dedication suggests a certain cloistered existence, and fame, to the extent that a scholar can be famous, has often been limited to a small circle of other specialists. To be a public intellectual, however, suggests public outreach, open debate in front of large audiences, and contributions to questions of wide-ranging concern. How do we reconcile these two roles, to keep what is important about each contributing toward the same goals of seeing the world as it is and daring to say we can do better?

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