

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Too Sad, Too Diverse, Too Poetic

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When the Emperor Was Divine, Julie Otsuka's award-winning historical novel, draws on her family's experiences of internment.¹ Her grandfather was arrested for suspected espionage on the heels of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and his family was interned at the Topaz, Utah, camp. Narrated through multiple voices identified only as "the woman," "the girl," "the boy," and so on, the novel prioritizes the perspectives of those interned, and in this categorical way gestures to the manifold others who have suffered at the hands of the US state. *When the Emperor Was Divine* brings forward the disruption to and fragmentation of families and communities, the inescapable dust and heat of the camp that are lived realities as much as signs and metaphors of persistent, assaultive discomfort, together with the incomprehensibility, uncertainty, and anger characterizing the lived experience of internment.

Otsuka's novel is also the book at the center of current political-curricular contestation in the Muskego-Norway school district, located in southeastern Wisconsin.² After the novel was selected by the district's curriculum committee for the district's Accelerated English program, its inclusion was challenged by school board members, including one who ran for election with the slogan "Critical thinking not critical race theory" (Lueders). Wisconsin journalists, situating the book's critics squarely with "the MAGA crowd," report that those contesting its inclusion in the curriculum described the book as too sad, too diverse, and too poetic—the charge of diversity related to the efforts of the curriculum committee to identify work by nonwhite authors.³ Concerns were also expressed over "balance," given that the curriculum already includes a ten-page excerpt of *Farewell to Manzanar*, the 1973 memoir by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston that gives us internment as part of her family's experience of life in the United States. The charge of

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imbalance also stems from the absence of a US government perspective contextualizing internment against the bombing of Pearl Harbor, a charge that reproduces the racially essentialist assumption of Japanese American loyalties to Japan that rationalized internment. A rally held in support of the book, about a month after the decision to exclude the novel was made public, included a teach-in where the Asian Pacific Islander Coalition of Wisconsin distributed copies of the book and brought attention to the anti-Asian violence currently unfolding across the nation (Linnane, “Wisconsinites Rally”). The exclusion of the novel was posited as an example of discrimination against Asian Americans, and its inclusion as urgently needed because of such discrimination.

This Wisconsin situation is but one example of the hundreds upon hundreds of similar curricular contestations unfolding across the country, largely around work that thematizes racism and sexuality or that criticizes the US nation. Nonprofit, free-speech-oriented groups such as the American Library Association and PEN America report notable increases in the number of books banned or otherwise challenged across the country—more than eleven hundred titles in the period from 1 July 2021 to 31 March 2022, according to PEN America (Friedman and Johnson).⁴ Also of note are broad-scale censorship efforts such as Texas HB 3979, which prohibits the teaching of “critical race theory,” and similar bills in Oklahoma and Florida aimed at buttressing whiteness and cis heteronormativity through their educational systems. These efforts find precedence in the 2010 Arizona anti-ethnic-studies law (HB 2281) designed to dismantle Mexican American studies. Indeed, even a cursory glance at the history of US high school curriculum design shows the constancy of censorship since at least the Civil War. The content and ways and means of teaching, and of aesthetic education through literary studies specifically, have arguably never not been an issue of lively contestation and material consequence. Simply put, the importance of overtly aesthetic matters to US political and cultural life has deep foundations firmly rooted in the centrality of whiteness and cis-heteronormativity

to the nation’s self-fashioning. Even if contestations like that over Otsuka’s book feel removed for reasons of geography or immediacy or interest, everyone—and certainly professional teachers of literature—cannot help but have a stake in aesthetic education.

I open my response to this set of essays on aesthetic education with this situation to give a sense of my interests in attending to how and why literature and literary study matter. Efforts like the one in Wisconsin to include or exclude Otsuka’s novel attest to the salience of these essays’ attention to how we learn and unlearn dominant and subordinated knowledge and sensibility by means of studied engagement with literature, and their intent to reflect on “the aims of aesthetic education in literary studies” (Gaskill and Stanley). While focused on higher education, the essays’ insights into and emphasis on the horizons of aesthetic education vis-à-vis the day-to-day activities of teaching lucidly illuminate these other scenes and sites of aesthetic education, at the same time that such activities are meaningfully contextualized by conditions beyond the classroom and the academy proper. The essays gathered here remind us, in other words, that training our senses and attention by teaching, learning, and practicing critical observation through engagement with literary works may be generatively conceptualized as less about the cultivation of the self and more as a matter of how we read and relate to the world. If, as Nicholas Gaskill and Kate Stanley energizingly and to my mind rightly posit in their introductory piece, aesthetic education is the “practice of possibility” insofar as “[o]ne of the aims of familiarizing students with the traditions and contexts of literary styles is after all to equip them to notice new meanings, new possibilities not only for understanding a text but for doing something with it,” the hope is that learning to train attention in these ways will translate to the doing of something in other contexts. As many of these essays ask, How are we sensitized or oriented to some phenomena, ideas, people, ways of being and living, and so on, and not to others? By what mechanisms and techniques does a text move us or not, and in what directions? As Elaine Auyoung asks, How do we come to

know what is “worth noticing?” Or, as Nan Z. Da summarily puts it, “You have to pay attention—but to what?” What teaching and learning practices correlate with such questions?

Among these essays, the most compelling for me are those that insist on the worldliness of aesthetic education in formulating and addressing such questions. By worldliness, I mean to refer to the embeddedness of literature and literary studies in the materialities of the social, cultural, and political economic aspects of life, a definition resonant with Edward Said’s expansively enabling rendering of the worldliness of a literary text as a “circumstantial reality” comprising both “sensuous particularity” and “historical contingency” (8).⁵ According to these essays, the material and conceptual conditions of possibility within and out of which literary studies emerge shape readership, for example (Brooks), and student capacities related to attenuated circumstances—to being “time-strapped” and “cash-strapped” (Case)—and include overt governmental-political constraints on interpretive practice (Da). Moreover, Laura Heffernan and Rachel Sagner Buurma vibrantly metaphorize texts to “growing plants,” thus inviting consideration of the grounds of fertility, roots, and rootedness and what it means and takes to cultivate and nurture, while Joseph North reminds us that “aesthetic evaluation happens all the time” and invokes the history of cultural studies to emphasize how aesthetic education might be articulated by way of “the commons.” In this vein, John McGowan brings forward Hannah Arendt’s reading of Immanuel Kant, focusing on the importance of sociality and communicability of judgment to their philosophies, and Jonah Siegel explores the Marxist understanding that acculturation through aesthetic education is tethered to upholding social class differentiation. The worldliness of literature and literary study finds heterogeneous and multiscalar expression in these essays and resonates with long-standing recognition of the importance of materiality to art, central to Black and ethnic studies literary genealogies and queer and feminist-of-color cultural critique. Gaskill and Stanley acknowledge as much in their invocation of Audre Lorde’s still powerful, still

crucial, insistence that “poetry is not a luxury.” (Citation of Lorde’s essay never fails to recall for me Langston Hughes’s 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” with its axiomatic understanding that debates over art and artistry cannot be severed from the organization and distribution of resources in accordance with the political economy of race, gender, sexuality, and class as they index life in the United States.) In brief, to the questions of what is worth noticing and by what means should or might we take notice and become sensitive, worldliness as elaborated in these essays emphasize how value—taste, judgment—is constructed and hierarchized in ways that correlate with the uneven distribution of vitality (of life) along the identificatory axes of race, gender, sexuality, and so on. These essays provoke further questions: Who is permitted or even compelled to consider such matters as literariness and artistry while others are effectively prohibited? Who (which communities or groups) and what (systems and ideologies) benefit from casting literature and literary study as luxury, as excess, and who or what is disadvantaged? What constitutes excess or luxury as differentiated from need and for whom, and what are the responsibilities and affordances that correlate with this worldliness? What does such worldliness tell us about the irrevocably social nature of being?

The contentiousness around Otsuka’s novel exemplifies the currency of worldliness in these senses. Thematically organized around national geopolitics, and written by someone with intimate familial experience of them, *When the Emperor Was Divine* was embraced not only by the Muskego-Norway school district’s curriculum committee but also by such well-established institutions as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) through its Big Read Initiative, providing a snapshot of the political economic, cultural landscape of these opening decades of the twenty-first century; its reception illuminates infrastructures that have emerged to administer diversity even as it reiterates the pattern of states contesting federal authority formative in US nation building from the civil rights movement to, clearly, the present day.⁶ At the same time, the Muskego-Norway situation shows us how

the logics of excess, notably articulated as aesthetic properties, are deployed to curtail the possibilities of sensing otherness, otherwise. The novel's exclusion from the Wisconsin curriculum on the basis that it is too sad, too diverse, and too poetic tacitly posits a just enough limit to what we might be taught to respond to with feeling—and implies both that there is appropriate feeling to be sensed and that danger lies beyond such propriety. We might understand these explanations to be evidence of already accomplished aesthetic education, which has taught us to acknowledge but not dwell on the nation's lamentable past.⁷ Too, we may note that the inclusion of the ten-page selection of *Farewell to Manzanar* is by implication just sad, diverse, and poetic enough—that is, feeling sufficient or adequate to this particular lamentable event. There is a calculus of quantity, affect, and national interest that rationalizes text selection not only in relation to internment but also generally, a calculus of which these essays are well aware. As Gaskill and Stanley put it, “a crucial ingredient . . . in aesthetic education is aesthetic objects.” While they observe as much in the course of specifying why literary as opposed to other aesthetic study matters distinctively, their point might be generatively misunderstood to remember anew the inadequacy of canonicity to the worldliness of literature. What might come of taking flight from Mark Wollaeger's efforts to “break down the idea of acquiring aesthetic expertise” by exemplifying such a text as Otsuka's—by which I mean to refer also to the contestations over it—in the study of literature and literary art? What might we teach to be noticeable, worthy of noticing? Implicit in all this is the strong suggestion to prioritize work that orients the practice of possibility toward the other, otherness, otherwiseness—toward that which exceeds normative affect. Literature's power to move registers in the explanation that Otsuka's novel is too poetic; I'm suggesting that we might do well to embrace and amplify deliberately that which is, precisely, too poetic, which in this context means challenging, moving, discomfiting, difficult, and unfamiliar.

The currency and spectacularization of anti-Asian violence, together with the commonness of

curricular censorship that buttresses overrepresentation of whiteness and cis-heteronormativity foundational to US national identity, make the contestation of Otsuka's novel unsurprising. The presentist association of current anti-Asian violence with the Trump presidency obscures the longevity of anti-Asian violence, alongside anti-Blackness and settler colonialism, to US nation formation since its founding. In this context, that sympathetic portrayals of Japanese American internees would be met with disapproval is merely logical. Perhaps less obviously but as potently, the embrace of the book by such established organizations as the NEA as well as by the book's supporters at the Wisconsin rally participates in the politics of representation through which the attempt to whitewash US history unfolds. What is clear is that while representation is inadequate to remedying social inequality—and here I would remind readers of the manifold critiques of such politics as well as the historical record reflecting the failure of representational politics to bring about social equity—neither can their material effectiveness be ignored.⁸ The Asian Pacific Islander Coalition, which was behind the rally in support of the book, argues for the teaching of Asian American history in the K–12 curriculum, an argument that posits and presumes a link between ignorance and racist violence. Without certain kinds of declarative knowledge—*knowing that* something has happened—social transformation lacks incitement. The capacity to develop sensitivity depends on *knowing that*, returning us again to the formative conditions of possibility out of which literature, but also students and teachers, emerge.

All this merely resounds the essays' collective acknowledgment that there is no simple, direct line to be drawn between aesthetic education and social transformation, leaving us with the task to derive in and through teaching ways of understanding and conveying how we are oriented and attuned toward certain values and judgments and away from others, how desires are nurtured or smothered, how we come to understand world and its changeability. In undertaking such a task, paying attention to worldliness—noticing it in the ways so many of

the essays here encourage literary study—remains key to the mattering of aesthetic education.

NOTES

Thanks to Nicholas Gaskill and Kate Stanley for their insightful feedback and work.

1. In 2003 the novel won the Asian American Literary Award, given by the Asian American Writers' Workshop, and the American Library Association's Alex Award.

2. I'm indebted and grateful to Jodi Melamed for bringing this situation to my attention.

3. See Lueders; Linnane, "Muskego Educators."

4. See also "Banned and Challenged Books."

5. My thanks to Brent Hayes Edwards for reminding me of this work by Said.

6. On "diversity" and management, see Ferguson; Melamed.

7. See Byrd on lamentability and the settler colonial rationality according to which phenomena such as indigenous dispossession and genocide lamentability are assigned.

8. On the limits and dangers of representational politics, see Melamed; Coulthard.

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