Gabriel Heller’s “Writing the Essay” class provided Wenxin Gao with the foundation for her essay on the erased stories of marginalized peoples. Can cultures achieve renewal through art? This essay draws on testimonies from the Chinese-Canadian and Cree Native American communities as it considers how a speech of renewal might be possible.

THE FREEDOM TO IMAGINE THE PAST

Wenxin Gao

The popular saying goes that history is written by the victors. The past has been written by those who had the privilege to put their experiences into words, and their histories gave birth to their sense of individual agency and power. The stories of the marginalized were often left undocumented, the historical equivalent of burying their individuality in an unmarked grave. Although this silence has been lifted with time, it is still deeply frustrating that the present-day stories of minorities are still treated as part of a collective exotic minority experience. In terms of race in the Western world, white is still the majority, and all else is a mysterious other.

In “Political Animals and the Body of History,” author Larissa Lai speaks out against the “othering of [her] body and [her] work by the mainstream” and the “racialization” that occurs when a person of color is seen first and foremost as a member of his or her race rather than as an individual (455). It begins to dawn on her “how certain texts became fetishized by critics, academics, and the general public in ways comparable to the way anthropologists and missionaries address field notes,” and that works by writers of color are often treated as tokenized examples of minority culture and framed from the racist point of view of the majority (457). This is illustrated when audiences ask writers of color whether their characters’ stories are adaptations of the author’s own experiences or those of their family. It implies that these writers “are not creative agents capable of constructing nuanced
fictions which address historical situations, but rather mere native informants reconstructing” (457). It becomes difficult, then, for writers of color to be separated from their racial identity. They have no choice but to “write from a place constructed for [them], pejoratively, by someone else” and to be constantly viewed through the lens of a dominant white culture (455). This is something that is simply not experienced by white writers, as Lai points out dryly, “I betcha no one ever asked Dickens if he was really Tiny Tim” (457).

Although Lai has no choice in her marginalization, she does seemingly have two possibilities as a writer: “to understand and work from the racialized position this society allots to the likes of us, or to work from a ‘color-blind’ liberal position which actively denies the way we have been racialized even as it perpetuates the very racial interests it claims not to see” (455). In short, Lai feels that she must claim the racialized space, because the other choice means denying that racism exists. However, claiming a racialized space “demands an acknowledgement of a history of racism to which the mainstream does not want to admit” and also “validates that eurocentric racist stance by placing ourselves in opposition to it” (458). Lai therefore rejects the notion of taking space in favor of making space: by “constructing a consciously artificial history for myself and others like me” (458), she creates a narrative that is not written by others but by herself. At the same time, she finds it difficult “for us diasporized types to make a homespace for ourselves given all the disjunctures and discontinuities of our histories” (458). A search for historical material, for example, proves to be fruitless when she finds few representations of her experience as a queer Chinese woman. According to Lai, “the only scholarship on lesbian history in China that I could find in English was an appendix to a book called Passions of the Cut Sleeve,” a section that was only “ten pages long, focused exclusively on the question of sexual practice, which felt empty and unsatisfying in its narrowness” (461). These limitations force her to imagine the pieces of her missing heritage through the only way she can—by writing fictional literature.

Fiction has always been a conduit for cultural transmission. In Canada, professor Neal McLeod advocates for the study and creation of poetic literature in order to understand indigenous Cree communi-
ties. In “Cree Poetic Discourse,” McLeod suggests that viewing Cree culture through the lens of Western social science is an act of “narrative violence” in that “Indigenous narratives are sanitized and there is a conceptual shift that often takes the vitality away from Indigenous life-worlds” (657). This is because it is difficult to articulate certain Cree concepts in English, especially in academic writing. The Cree poetic language is a system of “embodied understandings” that connect to the “sensations of body” and “sensations of the land,” which means that abstract ideas are embodied as an understanding of the physical world (662). As an example, the concept of “forever” is understood in poetry as a time “so long as the sun shall walk the sky, so long as the rivers shall run, so long as the grass shall grow” (663).

For the Cree people, their “ancient poetic pathways are not a mimicry of colonial narrative structures, but are rather grounded in [their] own traditions and world views” (660). McLeod’s great-grandfather, an elder in the Cree community, worries about a loss of cultural heritage because “the young Crees of today do not seem to want education, all of the Crees really want their children to have White-Man’s knowledge” (660). With Cree poetic discourse, McLeod hopes that there will be a “positive space’ of Indigenous knowledge” and a deeper understanding of older stories that “allows us to re-imagine narratives and to envision and imagine new possibilities for the future” (658,672).

The way McLeod talks about creating a “positive space’ of Indigenous knowledge” as a contemporary Indigenous scholar is similar to Lai’s wish for a “homespace” to ground her work. However, the process of setting this space is complicated by Lai’s inability to understand Chinese, just as the young Crees find it difficult to connect to Cree culture because they only know English. This language barrier prevents Lai from fully immersing herself in the intricacies of Chinese symbolism and history, as she has to rely on translated works that are “bleached not only by the ideological interests of gender and class but also of race and culture” (458). By translating the language, an act of “narrative violence” has already been committed against the authenticity of the original work. Lai’s own understanding of Chinese symbols seems to be grounded in fantasy and imagination rather than history. Perhaps her sense of cultural displacement is not just due to her
education in a Western society, but also due to the fact that so much of culture is tied to language, which makes it difficult for her to connect deeply with her heritage without speaking Chinese. Lai said she chose not to learn Chinese because of the “pressures of assimilation,” which would have been a non-issue if she lived in a society that was free of racism—a system of oppression that compelled her and the young Crees to integrate into the culture of “white superiority” (458, 455).

There is a disconnect from history felt by people of color who no longer speak the language of their origins, particularly diasporized people of color. The artwork Mother Tongue (2002) by Zineb Sedira illustrates this by showing three videos of three generations of women (Sedira, her mother, and her daughter) talking to each other about their memories as young women. However, they each only speak in their first language: her mother in Arabic, Sedira in French, and her daughter in English. It follows Sedira’s personal history as a descendant of Algerian parents who was born in France and spent her adulthood in England. Sedira’s work deals with the “issues of representation, family, language, memory and landscape” (Sedira). As the grandmother and granddaughter fail to communicate in broken sentences and their conversation comes to an uneasy halt, it illustrates how growing up in different contexts has destroyed the means of communication for this immigrant family. How can the young granddaughter then be expected to understand her own heritage when she cannot even understand her own grandmother? Having been brought up in a Western society, the granddaughter, like Lai, feels no strict attachment to her cultural history, and this is exacerbated by her limited understanding of her native language.

There is perhaps also more than one dimension to Lai’s alienation from her culture that goes deeper than simply the limitation of not being able to use her native language. Adrienne Rich writes in “Invisibility in Academe” that out of the many injustices that are inflicted on the lesbian community, invisibility is one that is seemingly insignificant yet still “dangerous and painful” (218). She compares the experience of being a lesbian to looking into a mirror and seeing nothing: an existence where “those who have power to name and socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you” (218).
Before the 20th century, all women “were forbidden by law to speak in public meetings,” but according to Rich, even in the 20th century queer women were still being told time and time again to “keep your private life private” in a way that “fragments” a person’s experiences and prevents her from “integrating love and work and feelings and ideas, with the empowerment that can bring” (218). Even in Women’s studies courses, the discussions remain based in heterosexuality, and the experiences of women of color are treated as an afterthought “while the central discourse remains unrelentingly white” (219). Rich’s solution to her “invisibility” was to be “a very public and visible lesbian,” to assert her existence and to remind herself that this was just “a game with mirrors” where you can demand to be seen and heard (218).

As Lai writes, “[her] work comes from many places at once” (455). Her isolation may come from her being a Chinese person or a diasporized person of color, but it also comes from her being a woman, and in particular an “invisible” queer woman. The history she has been hoping to find – “a history with women identified women of Chinese descent living in the West at its center”—does not really exist (458). Her intersectional identities mean that she is “invisible” in her own culture, and much less visible in a mainstream discourse that is already overwhelmingly heterosexual and white. It catalyzes the need for her to articulate her own history through her fiction, to play the “game of mirrors” that affirms her existence. There are several queer Asian theorists that caution against “projecting the needs and contexts of the present on to the past” because we simply do not look at history with the same pair of eyes as those who lived through it (459). But Lai argues that there will always be a longing for one’s history to have a body and form, and she does not claim her artificial history to be absolute but “one of uninhibited, zany invention for the sheer joy of it” (459). Her freedom to imagine the past is so powerful because for too long this freedom has been in the hands of those with power and used to “justify the reproduction of tired stereotypes and the perpetuation of historically unjust power balances” in the name of artistry (459). The examples given of Pocahontas, Suzy Wong, and Madame Butterfly are such iconic woman characters of color that we do not...
even stop and question them for the racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes they are.

“What is history, after all, but narrative?” asks Lai (458). Minority communities have always struggled to claim their own side of the narrative or to reclaim a slur, and Lai is creative in her approach of inventing fiction that encompasses aspects of her multi-faceted identities. She overcomes her loneliness and the limitation of not understanding her language by filling in the holes left by history and demystifying the minority experience. In her research into the lives of those like her, she found the historical figure Yu Hsuan-chi, a Chinese woman poet and courtesan who is rarely translated as she is forgotten in favor of “sanctioned male heavyweights” (459). Lai ended up basing one of her fictional characters off of Yu, and brought her to life in her stories when the history books have chosen to forget her. She forces us to accept Yu as a whole person rather than one defined by the fragmented identities of her culture or her gender. No doubt this is a healing process against the injuries of injustice for Lai too—to look in the mirror and paint her own reflection. When she failed to find herself in history, she chose to find herself in her art.

WORKS CITED


Dear Mr. Phạm Vũ Luân,

In August 2015, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) published a draft proposal that suggested many changes to Vietnam’s education system. One of the most controversial changes was integrating History with Civic Education and Defense Education. History would no longer be a mandatory individual subject and would instead become part of a new optional subject called Civic and Defense. When questioned at the 2015 parliament meeting about why an important subject like History was integrated, you, Mr. Phạm, as the Minister of Education and Training, eluded the question, saying that the proposal was still unofficial. However, whether History should be integrated or kept as an individual subject does not matter. What needs to be reformed, I believe, is the way History is taught in Vietnam.

The curriculum for Vietnamese students is heavy because they over-rely on rote memorization, which results in ineffective tests and exams that require students to regurgitate facts and figures. This pedagogical method causes the students to lose interest in learning. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, approximately 500,000 students of all ages drop out of school per year (“Population and Employment”). The alarming number of students underscores a
grave problem with education in Vietnam. I am aware that the MOET always makes annual reforms, but to most people including myself, those “reforms” seem like a formality. New textbooks are reprinted. The format of an exam is changed. The recent draft proposal is also an example. These meaningless acts have pushed the scene of Vietnam’s educational system to a stalemate situation where students become “lab rats” for the MOET to test their changes while teachers are helplessly exhausted. Mr. Phạm, it is time for a fundamental change. We need to change how students think about learning, starting with History.

I understand that it is hard to reform the way History is taught given that academic freedom is limited in Vietnam. Yet as the Minister of Education and Training, would you at least try to tackle the problem seriously? In Vietnam, students are discouraged from debating with teachers about the veracity of the knowledge passed onto them. Whatever is taught must be true and will be tested. The main reason behind this one-way relationship between students and teachers is the influence of Confucius’s teachings that have been deeply rooted in our subconscious minds for thousands of years. Since the first day of school, I was told to appreciate those who gave birth to me, my parents, and those who give me knowledge, my teachers. Confucius’s ideals teach me gratitude and appreciation. They also lead back to a beautiful tradition that is celebrated annually on November 20 as the Vietnamese Teachers’ Day.

However, this student–teacher relationship can also be controversial, as demonstrated in an incident from April of 2015. An anonymous elementary school student was slapped by his teacher supposedly for being “argumentative and disobedient” (“Tranh cai”; translation mine). To many people’s surprise, his parents publicly apologized to the teacher for “not educating their son well.” They thanked her for slapping their son. During my elementary school years, I was the witness to—and the victim of—many slappings. I felt scared and never raised my hand unless I knew for sure that my answer was what the teachers wanted. I bet that the anonymous student and his friends felt the same. Although students indeed appreciate the teachers who have enlightened their young minds, students should not be discouraged from raising their own voices.
When it comes to teaching History, that student-teacher relationship is taken advantage by the Communist Party to impose distorted facts on the impressionable minds of the youth. History textbooks at all levels are intentionally designed to give an uneven emphasis on the greatness of the Communist Party of Vietnam. During my ten-year education in Vietnam’s public schools, I had to memorize the numbers of enemies killed by the Communist army or the exact dates and hours when the army had launched attacks. History, to me, was mere memorization of meaningless facts. However, when I won a scholarship to study in the U.S. and had the opportunity to learn American History, I was taught about the significance of a battle, instead of how many people died in it, or the relationship between two events, instead of when and what time they occurred. My education in the U.S. has taught me to connect different events in history and have my personal perspective about them. I come to see history as a meaningful, continuous thread of humans’ development.

My educational experience of American History resonates with an article written by Theresa Johnston, a researcher in education. She describes an effective History class as one in which students can “engage regularly with challenging primary source documents” (Johnston). These “primary source documents” are hidden or missing in our current Vietnamese History curriculum. Without these reliable sources of information, Vietnamese students find it difficult to see connections between historical events, especially when they are forced to memorize facts. Vietnamese historian and parliamentary delegate Dương Trung Quốc says that the dull teaching of History can cause students to be “indifferent to history itself” (“ĐBQH”; translation mine). In other words, if students are taught to think critically about history, they would not only find more interest in the history of Vietnam, but also know how to make the country better.

The Communist Party has done many great things to our country, but history must not be fabricated, and History, as a subject taught to students, must be as objective as possible. In her essay “In History,” Jamaica Kincaid expresses her struggle to understand the history of her home country, Antigua, which was named by Christopher Columbus after a church even though “churches are not important originally” to her people (184). Like her country—once
colonized by the Spanish Empire—our country has been invaded by many empires: 1000 years by the Chinese, 61 years by the French, and 27 years by the Americans. Yet, our ancestors never surrendered, and now as an independent nation, we have many tasks to accomplish. The most important one is to educate our children to take pride in our glorious past and to take responsibility for the failures of our government. In her essay, Kincaid raised a question: should history be “an idea,” “an open wound,” or “a collection of facts” (181)? How is one supposed to feel about history? I believe that students should be informed of both the good and bad things done by our government and undergo the same feelings about history that Kincaid felt. Although confusing and perhaps frustrating, the feelings are crucial for students to understand the history of Vietnam.

Mr. Phạm, the teaching of History in school needs to transcend political ideals. History does not represent the Party; it represents the past, present, and future across nations. If students, the future leaders of Vietnam, fail to see the connections in history, how will they learn from the past to create a better future? How will Vietnam ever develop?

I hope that you will seriously consider my concern and make a more meaningful change to the education system in Vietnam.

Sincerely,
Hieu Do

WORKS CITED


