

A Familiar in the Village

By Richard Oyama

Democracy in America was never the same as Liberty in Europe. Liberty was a great life-throb. But in America Democracy was always something anti-life. (I)t was a form of self-murder. Or of murdering somebody else . . . The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.

--D.H. Lawrence

Windows down, scream along
To some America First rap, country song
A slaughterhouse, an outlet mall
Slot machines, fear of God
--Phoebe Bridgers, "I Know the End"

Nationality is an accident of birth. My *nisei* parents moved to New York City after early release from a World War II internment camp in Jerome, Arkansas. My grandparents immigrated to the United States during the Meiji Era (1867-1912) when a draconian land tax imposed by the government caused *nihonjin* to sail to Hawaii, Peru, Brazil and the U.S. I grew up in Upper Manhattan but have not lived there for 40 years.

My family's story was not a confirmation of the myth of Japanese Americans as the model minority, codified by a Newsweek article entitled "Out-Whiting the Whites." My father's dream was to become a working journalist, but few newsrooms were hiring *nisei* in the postwar years. Two of my uncles, who had been successful in the import-export business in Tokyo (not unlike Willy Loman's brother rich from the diamond mines in South Africa) provided the capital for a Japanese grocery and gift shop on 123rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue on the western edge of Harlem. My father ran that store for thirty years. He was irrevocably embittered by the internment years, eventually going into psychoanalysis for eight years to confront this and other dysfunctional family issues. Once I asked my mother how she felt about moving back to California in the 1970s. "I felt like shitting on it," she replied. My mother was not a decorous geisha. Her blunt edge could be startling.

She had lived in Japan briefly after her father's death and despised its feudal regimen, her *shamisen* lessons, the long walk past watery rice fields to school. In contrast my father who had visited Japan only once after his mother's death in 1960 idealized the rapidly developing nation into Japan Inc. as a kind of utopia, what Salman Rushdie called an "imaginary homeland." He claimed lineage from court nobility and the samurai, while patronizing his wife as a peon descended from farmers in west Hiroshima. It accorded him a status in his mind that the public sphere of America would not.

One doesn't make "real money" as I did teaching college English as an adjunct professor or working as a grant proposal writer at a non-profit organization. A painter-friend called the adjunct a "cultural migrant laborer" not unlike the Okies following the seasonal crops in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. You go where the academy requires part-time workers in return

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for no job security or health benefits. It was a life of involuntary poverty. Good intentions are not rewarded in heaven.

After being laid off my last bad joke of a job at a predatory for-profit college in the South Valley of Albuquerque, the *barrio*, I began the proceedings to foreclose on a ranch-style house in the Northeast Heights close to the foothills of the Sandia Mountains. The house was burglarized in broad daylight by a gang of thieves who had been scoping out our comings and goings, splintering the front door with a crowbar. They stole our laptops, loose change and Mexican costume jewelry. Another afternoon I came home to find a SWAT team with semi-automatic weapons drawn, roaming the neighborhood, looking for a perpetrator who had mown down a cop with an SUV.

At the Los Altos park where I took Sarah, my Shepherd/Chow Chow rescue dog, I met a white fellow who named his pet Glock, the Austrian semi-automatic pistol. Another man with a pitted face said, responding to a beef, that he plunged a knife down his antagonist's throat. Yet another showed me his Derringer and offered to put me out of my misery. I declined. Sociopaths were strangely attracted to me.

In the three years waiting for the foreclosure to be finalized, I became disillusioned not only with the city, the poetry scene, the latent and overt violence, the casual machismo but a larger disillusionment with the country itself that Norman Mailer wrote was more boorish after the Gulf War. I felt myself in a sort of purgatory, realizing my early Social Security would not enable me to continue to live in the U.S., except perhaps in Louisiana or Mississippi, which routinely fell below New Mexico in socioeconomic rankings.

I began to research online affordable cities abroad with a substantial English-speaking expatriate and retirement community. Costa Rica and Chiang Mai, Thailand appeared on many "best of" lists. Though Latin America appealed to me—I had taught its literature and had some Spanish—I had an atavistic desire to return to Asia. On a faculty grant from the arts college in Oakland where I taught, I had made a brief sojourn to Japan. In Asia I would be part of the ethnic majority and had a suspicion that Thai capitalism would be ameliorated by Confucian family values and Theravada Buddhism. The edges would be smoothed out. The Asian bubble had burst, wealth inequalities were vast, coups were common in Thailand. Yet I decided to risk it, taking Thai language classes at a local wat in Albuquerque.

By chance I found out that a sansei friend with whom I had collaborated on a nisei poetry project in Berkeley was living in Chiang Mai. A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, he had worked for Pacific News Service, a progressive news agency, and as an editor for the English-language section of a Japanese print publication in Tokyo. A flood of emails exchanged between us provided me with usable knowledge and would ease the transition.

Foreclosure was finalized in the realtor's office in an East Side mall where everything was colored beige. There was a farewell luncheon at a seafood restaurant on Central Avenue. In the photographs I look haggard.

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The day came for my departure. Two women friends saw me off at the Sunport. Soon one of them would retire in Guanajuato, Mexico. The other continues to teach at the University of New Mexico (UNM), which she acidly calls the University of Not Much. I don't remember if it was tearful. There was engine trouble, expectation, delay.

It was a long flight with a squalling baby. I had a big novel and earbuds. There were in-flight movies on a screen the size of a postcard. The food was unmemorable. There was a layover in Seoul. The Taiwanese stewardesses were svelte in their jungle-green outfits.

What I felt upon landing in Bangkok was a buoyancy, exhilaration, a lightness of being. As I disembarked, I noticed Thais walked differently than Americans. The women were easy in their hips. There was little anxiety or aggression. I spotted my friend behind an aluminum barrier. He was glad to see me. My experience was apposite to James Baldwin's in his famous essay, "A Stranger in the Village." My face linked me to the visual majority—my black hair, my moon-shaped face, my epicanthic fold. I was a familiar and could even "pass" as Thai or Japanese until I opened my mouth and the tones came out all wrong.

Chiang Mai was not undiscovered. Before the covid-19 pandemic, it had greeted millions of Western tourists and in fact its economy was tourist-dependent with all the amenities that a traveler would want—state of the art shopping malls (or, as one is called, Maya Lifestyle Center), supermarkets, yoga studios, vegan restaurants, bars, nature preserves and, for the sexpats, a block-long red-light district. The city had a view of the surrounding mountains and was divided north to south by the Ping River. The climate was tropical, hot, humid. Graham Greene weather. There was a burning season when farmers would set ablaze the foliage before the planting season. The season was beginning earlier and earlier, lasting roughly a quarter of the year. At that point the city empties out as retirees and expats, those who can afford it, flee for the southern islands or points elsewhere. In those months Chiang Mai's air turns yellow and noxious, and the mountains disappear into haze.

Unlike the Europeans Baldwin met, Thais do not "move with an authority which I shall never have" because of their affiliation with Chartres cathedral, "the power of the spires, the glory of the windows." In fact I remain unconvinced that this is true of working class Europeans. I suspect they have other problems on their minds. Theravada Buddhism is syncretic with Hinduism and other borrowings. They have faith that by making alms, performing acts of goodness, that karma will insure an auspicious rebirth. I rarely experience either the malevolence or wonder that Baldwin did, but rather occasional curiosity at my status as a "hafu," an American of Japanese descent. But has the white man "cost me in anguish and rage?"

Yes.

I have not had a knee locked on my neck, been shot by a police officer in the back nor been a slave with a bit braced in my mouth like a horse. I have not been called "Neger! Neger!" with its ugly echoes of an epithet familiar to all Americans. Nor have I been called here any of the anti-Asian epithets—Chink, Jap, gook—that I imagine are now common currency once Trump gave

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permission to attacks against Asian Americans by referring to covid as “Kung Flu” or implying that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory in Wuhan.

Trump did not create hatred against Asian Americans in the U.S. He was simply the bad djinn who unplugged the bottle that emitted the toxic vapors. In the 19th century Chinese were driven out of California and the Pacific Northwest after laboring on the Transcontinental Railroad. Some were lynched, shot and massacred, including 18 Chinese men by a white mob in what is now downtown Los Angeles in 1871.

In the 19th century the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed as were restrictive immigration laws against Japanese and Filipinos. The U.S. conducted three wars in Asia in the 20th century. Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 that set into motion the internment of over 100,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast. In 1980 the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment concluded that such actions were precipitated by “race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership.” Financial compensation for millions of dollars in losses was negligible. When “Japan, Inc.” was demonized for the success of imported cars and the purchase of real estate in the U.S., two unemployed autoworkers in Detroit accosted Vincent Chin, mistaking him for Japanese, and split his skull with a baseball bat. Chin died.

However, racism can be nuanced. I’ve butted my head against a glass ceiling of opportunity. I have been ignored and rendered invisible by a waitress in Guerneville who directs her questions to my Anglo girlfriend or a counterperson in Santa Monica who apparently had no problem with optics when it comes to Caucasians but experienced temporary blindness when it comes to “Orientals.” Upon first meeting a Texan at the dog park in Albuquerque, he was silent, looking first at a deflated soccer ball, then at me, then at the soccer ball, then at me and remarked, “Musta been made in Chiinaa, thass why it’s so cheap.” I walked away, muttering fuck you under my breath. On a bus in Hoboken with my Chinese American girlfriend, a pair of whiteboys sat behind us, wondering aloud if “their cunts are slanted like they say.” I turned around, threatening to brain them with a quart bottle of beer. On a winter day in New Jersey I was walking by two white boys who were throwing a football on the ridge of a hill. A verbal altercation ensued. One of the boys called me a nigger. It only occurred to me later that that was the worst insult he could come up with.

It has been six years since I left the United States. I am no longer in contact with that sansei friend. He had morphed into a Trumpite and a mean drunk, threatening to fill up a shotgun with rock salt and shoot Syrians. I befriended a poetaster at the guesthouse in the Old City who slipped drunk in the *hong naam*, ending up dead in a San Francisco Chinatown flophouse. I practice tai chi and non-attachment.

I am an expatriate of Japanese descent in Asia and expect to live out my remaining days here. “(T)he village offers, obviously, no distractions whatever,” Baldwin wrote, “and has the further advantage of being extremely cheap.” This is true of Chiang Mai as well though the devastation of the tourist economy by the pandemic will change that. The heroic mythos of America,

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propagated by film genres like the Western, is a fiction I disbelieve. “A terrible beauty is being born,” Yeats wrote. Or maybe a rough beast is slouching toward Bethlehem.

The imagined limitlessness of the continental United States, its greed, excess and U.S.-centric world-view have little to do with me. Black humanity was fractioned in our founding documents: 3/5 of a man. I’m not persuaded that social policy or education can eradicate white supremacist ideology when Republicans deny the January 6th U.S. Capitol attack, the election of Biden and Harris, and suppress voting rights of black and brown people. Whiteness persists in going unexamined, a whiteness Baldwin said is dependent on an innocence that also involves dissembling; that is, a form of delusion and denial. U. S. political discourse is essentially fraudulent, what Herbert Marcuse called a form of “repressive tolerance.” The charade of democracy allows a bandwidth of ideology as narrow as a ledge. The U.S. is not a liberal nor big-hearted country now, but a centrist-right one. Some even prefer Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, and the big lie.

My decision to leave the U.S. was initially economic, but I regret nothing. My identification is with the Lost Generation in Paris escaping what H.L. Mencken called “the booboisie,” black expatriates like Baldwin and Richard Wright, Josephine Baker and countless jazz musicians. In the past year and a half of pandemic and burning season, climate emergency and end of empire, all sentient beings are being tested. Yet acts of kindness manifest themselves even under duress. Baldwin quotes James Joyce who said history is a nightmare then amends the Irish author, adding it is a nightmare from which no one *can* awaken. He adds, “The abyss is experience, the American experience.”

I have no home in the world.