

On the Value of Fragmentation

Asian American Literature (AS AM 5)

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Gabor Por

(David Roh's Friday 8 AM class)

The future of Asian American literature will reflect the realities of the contemporary world. If the world, the society, the authors are living in, will be a multicultural mix, then their artwork will show a mixture of different cultures too. I am confident that a variety of literary forms and genres will live on, but equally sure that artworks that can reflect the multifaceted nature of the human experience will be closer to the heart of the reading audience. Novels, stories with numerous locations, plotlines, characters, timeframes will be considered the norm, or at least a major trend.

Karen Tei Yamashita's *The Tropic of Orange* might be one of the first great examples for the above. The "HyperContext" page at the beginning of the book provides a table of contents for the book in a grid. It offers a possibility for following the story of any of the seven individual characters--along a row in the table--or by taking any one of the seven days the story plays out—columns--and read what happens on that particular day. This seven-by-seven grid adds two additional options of reading the book, besides the traditional, from cover to cover, method.

I believe this format is well-aligned for today's reading habits. Ever since television burst into the living room of most American homes we can read complaints how youth reads less and less compared to previous generations. The passive activity of sitting in front of the TV requires less effort. The variety of channels, images, movies, entertainment available gives a false sense of choice. (While in reality by now most of the TV stations are in the hands of a few corporations.) It also simplifies the lives of parents, who might be busy working, they can entrust the box to baby-sit their children. But it no longer applies to young people only, adults spend more time in front of TV than, say, reading too.

There are at least two major social impacts caused by this change of behavior. One of them is the shortening attention span. If you do not like what you see or do not find it interesting enough with the flicker of your finger you can change the channel. The other, I referred to already, is the sense of choice. You can decide which channel to flip to. If this, watching television is the major form of entertainment for a growing number of Americans than it will surely have some influence on other aspects of their lives. I argue that literature that complies more with these habits will have a higher chance to become more successful. I do not wish to neglect other factors, like literary quality, language, style... Instead, I suggest that from two artworks with similar qualities, the one that is broken into smaller segments and organized in a way that allows multiple entry points of ways of reading will be more attuned to the audience's expectation. Readers want to be able to read shorter pieces at a time and piece them together later at will. Furthermore they want to be able to select the angle that works the best for them. If there is more than one, they feel they have a choice and will appreciate it.

The Tropic of Orange was published in 1997, just five years after the World Wide Web was born, but already 8 years ago from today, from 2005. The idea of hypertext is older, as it is apparent from the children books of the 1980s, where children could make decisions how a story should continue and based on their decision they jump to different pages. The Web expanded this idea to any and every document, including pictures, images, videos, on a vast international computer network. Any two pieces can be connected with a link. I do not know the statistics regarding the numbers of heavy web users vs. heavy TV watchers, but positive that there is a large group that does not belong to both groups, only to one of them. I believe what I wrote above for TV viewers applies to a large extent to web users too. Increasing web use also contributes to the short attention span and abundance of choice. The difference is that most of the

content on the web requires more active participation. A main appeal of the web lays in its interactivity, communicating with other people anywhere, any time. But on the web people often read even shorter texts than a book chapter or newspaper article before they decide to move on, follow a link or read the whole piece. Modern literature has to suffice the needs of the people who read in this fashion.

So far we considered one kind of fragmentation: structural. Let me offer another one. The *Tropic of Orange* does not have one single protagonist, it has seven, whose lives and lines intertwine, but graspable individually. The chapters relating to the individuals' lives were all written in distinctive genres. We have Emi's, that reads like a newscast, Arcangel's magical realism, Gabriel's detective noir, Buzzworm's radioplay, Bobby's working class language, Rafael's nurturing perspective, Murakami's symphony, all reflecting what kind of characters they are. If we read the book in a linear fashion we have to switch gears every time a new chapter starts. This speeding/slowing, shift in point of view and style is a similar experience to surfing on TV or on the web.

Nina Revoyr's *Southland* creates excitement and tension through another kind of structuring. Her novel jumps back and forth between various times of the 20th century. This temporal division is not organized in a chronological order; the chapters are not following a particular timeline. Instead they follow (more or less) the logic of an investigation. There are two short chapters that have to be taken out from this stream. They don't contain any person's names and this turns them into eternal, universal sub-stories. They depict two phases of a secretive love-story and with this omission they enforce the reader's perception of peaking into a hidden secret. These two short intermissions balance nicely, the rest of the book in terms of time slots. As each chapter is titled by a year or an interval (and occasionally a name) it is easy to get an overview of

what I am talking about. Here are the titles of the first few chapters: 1994, 1994/1963, 1994, 1947, 1994, 1962, 1994, 1939, 1994, 1942-48, 1961, 1994, 1963... The reader is forced to jump into different decades from one chapter to another. This is the kind of fragmentation, which modern readers can handle easily, in fact expect them.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* contains similar chapter titles, but in a more orderly manner: 1968, 1971, 1982 and so on up till 1999. I admit it seems a more straightforward, coherent story than the other two discussed, with less post-modern breaking ups. Spatially however it covered a wider area than *Southland*. Gogol's parents moved from India to the US. But we also get to know the location of Gogol's grandparents, another corner of India. Then through his lifecourse he moves a few times. Admittedly he lives most of his life within an area that can be covered with a five hour train ride. "Most", with the exceptions of childhood visits to India. Therefore it would not be entirely accurate to call this book spatially segmented. The other aspect I noticed that was somewhat disjointed is in the lifestyle. There are big jumps in this regard for the protagonist at every physical relocation, move: from India to the US, from the big city to small town, from there to a college dorm, and then onto individualistic life and so on. The detectable tension in this book derives from the mental shifts associated with these moves. Gogol acts as if he could take on a whole new personality every time he wishes. This is the real driving force for the reader to follow the story.

Most of what I wrote so far could be true for any kind of American literature, it is not specific for Asian American. That is my point, partially. To a larger and larger extent the disparate realities that Americans from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds experienced become similar to each other. I do not deny that racism and discrimination still exist. Neither that cultural, linguistic and other differences are strong. But the multicultural nature of the overall

society, particularly in California enables a kind of existence that is "different an equal." This, as opposed to the older adage of "separate but equal", has a chance to create a richer culture. Asian Americans and their literature are a valuable, contributing and defining part of this. As more and more authors feel less and less the burden of representation and feel freer and freer to write whatever their creative genius inspires them to, the more multifaceted writings we get. They will all reflect their lives and ideas to a different degree. Depending on how important the Asian American part is in their identity, besides all the other parts, like their gender, schooling, social class, language, occupation, sexual orientation, interests... they may include less or more explicitly Asian American characters and themes in their books. They will reproduce American and Asian American culture at the same time and make the two inseparable from each other.

I gave a number of examples of how modern Asian American novels create interest by fragmenting their content through spatial and temporal differentiation and by using a range of characters and genres. I pointed out that the 21st century audience is unique from previous centuries' because its attention span is shorter and demands more choices. These characteristics developed, at least in the recreation area, due to ever increasing watching of TV and using the internet. Asian American literature will have to be able to compete with those media and therefore will have to use similar techniques to capture attention.