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Asianfail: Narratives of Disenchantment and the Model

Minority by Eleanor Ty (review)

Jason Wang

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deflection of its racial violence, the nation and its victims can never fully forget this unwanted past. Wong's beleaguered art career recalls a similar tradition of eliding Chinese contributions to the United States, such as those of Chinese immigrant railroad laborers whose work was rendered largely invisible, despite being foundational to the nation's very infrastructure. Wong's story reminds us that one can be excluded from the national terrain of culture even while being the literal hand in its very production. As much of the emphasis in Asian American cultural studies is on more contemporary popular culture, scholars who are interested in early twentieth-century Asian American popular culture will find this film to be an invaluable contribution to fields related to historic Asian American visual cultures.

Ann Thuy-Ling Tran
University of California, Irvine

Note

1. Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

***Asianfail: Narratives of Disenchantment and the Model Minority*, by Eleanor Ty. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. X + 156 pp. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 978-0-252-08235-1.**

Eleanor Ty's book *Asianfail* is a valuable and timely contribution to Asian American and Asian Canadian studies, providing a novel way of understanding the new generation of Asian North Americans through their narratives. The book fills a significant gap in scholarship, not only by identifying the changing dynamics of Asian North American literature and culture in relation to economic, geographical, and political circumstances, but also by attending to how their creative works refashion a white-dominant platform to negotiate ethnical identities, emotional expressions, and individual happiness in a larger global context. In this, Ty's approach is two-pronged. First, she debunks the myth of Asians as "the model minority": that is, the still-prevailing discourse in popular culture since the 1960s, when sociologist William Petersen first coined the term to describe Japanese Americans in the *New York Times Magazine*. The concept of a model minority links Asian culture with strong community values as well as a high work ethic and dedication, which bring about social success despite Asian people's cultural marginalization. Second, using various literary and visual narratives as examples, Ty scrutinizes the emotional reactions and consequences to the everyday grievances that Asian North Americans tackle.

As she writes, "These affective responses to the national, familial, economic, and professional pressures reveal the still-intertwined relationship between the capitalist ethos, where an individual is seen as having a duty to prosper and be happy; traditional Confucian values of filial obedience; and the politics of race, ethnicity, gender, and globalization" (24).

Specifically, Ty examines what she terms narratives of failure, demonstrating how unhappiness, pressure, and depression infiltrate contemporary Asian North American cultural products, such as fiction, autobiographies, and films. Ty's argument of failure reaches far beyond considering material discontent and disenchantment, however: it permeates affective experiences, family tensions, and individual burdens from the financial and professional (self-) expectations that result from the discourse of model minority. She contends that the model minority myth glosses over more intricate immigration (hi) stories and complex material backgrounds.

The book's six chapters pivot around the bodily and affective experience of *Asianfail*. Chapters 1 through 3 explore the concept of *Asianfail* in relation to the precarity of daily life. In Chapter 1, Ty examines the young protagonists who are entangled in coming-of-age problems and challenge the designated success in Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and Mariko Tamaki's novella *Cover Me* (2000) and graphic novel *Skim* (2008). The spotlight shifts in Chapter 2 to second-generation youth who question the neoliberal sense of desire and conventional family relationship and sexuality narratives in Asian American films, such as Gene Cajayon's *The Debut* (2000), Georgia Lee's *Red Doors* (2005), and Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2004). Chapter 3 interrogates the refugees' and transnational citizens' struggles with traumatic memories of war, loss, and violence in fictional geopolitical spaces created by novelists Lê Thị Diễm Thúy and Madeleine Thien.

The remaining chapters address the corporal and mental consequences of *Asianfail*. Chapter 4 examines the aging and the aged as a failure under the model minority discourse that automatically configures senior citizens as "those who are beyond the age of economic and professional productivity" (86). Ty's scrutiny of aging and the aged not only reveals cross-generational feelings of depression and shame but also suggests that aged bodies can be reconfigured by affective memories and nostalgia. Chapter 5 explores Catherine Hernandez's play *Singkil* (2009) and Jan Wong's self-published best-selling memoir *Out of the Blue* (2012) as stories of work-related stress and mental breakdown. In this, the narrators are victimized by their "neoliberal belief in hard work" (110), and their alleged failure emanates from their own images of "the overachiever immigrant" (114). Chapter 6 resituates Alex Gilvarry's novel *From the Memoirs of a Non-enemy Combatant* (2012) and Keshni Kashyap and Mari Araki's graphic novel *Tina's Mouth: An Existential Comic Diary* (2012) within the post-9/11

context, in which Filipino and Indian “brown bodies” are conceived as failure personified under a racialized and militarized masculinity celebrated in the grim reality of cultural alterity and political propaganda.

As these examples illustrate, *Asianfail* reconstructs the social and political environments in which Asian North Americans are suffocated by mental afflictions and failure to question neoliberal notions of the good life and happiness. In their narratives, the Asian American and Asian Canadian protagonists “present alternatives to the current definitions of success, which center on professional and economic achievement” (136). In this way, Asian North American literature and culture go beyond the hackneyed themes of immigration, racial exclusion, and difference.

And herein precisely lies the strength of *Asianfail*. The book asks us to reconsider and recast outmoded discursive models that ultimately risk stereotyping Asian diasporic cultures predicated on economic success and hard work. By doing so, the book opens up a plethora of narratives in which the protagonists experiment with new possibilities to pursue new forms of happiness through cross-cultural creativity and imagination. At the same time, however, *Asianfail* leaves some questions and problems unresolved. For example, to what extent might there be a universal experience of failure across ethnic boundaries? Even though the model minority discourse is often associated with Asian Americans, the psychological mechanism and emotional responses to familial pressures and societal expectations are arguably universal, or at least apply to other minorities in similar ways. Indeed, the concept of the model minority is sometimes evolved to describe Jewish Americans as well. To be fair, Ty acknowledges that Asian North Americans are not the only ethnic group experiencing the failure that she investigates. In addition, she notices the emotional responses to failure by engaging with affect theories, such as Lauren Berlant’s aesthetical and affective way of understanding neoliberal crisis, Sara Ahmed’s politics of emotion and fear, and Sianne Ngai’s ugly feelings.

Still, Ty’s reading of narratives about failure could be even more illuminating and compelling through further elaboration on Asian North Americans’ interactions and encounters—both emotional and bodily—with the failure beyond their stereotypical success. For example, Kevin Kwan’s satirical trilogy, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015), and *Rich People Problems* (2017), exposes a new culture of immigration stories and intentions. As the latter books illustrate, many new Asian immigrants and their offspring are no longer seeking better economic and professional opportunities in North America because they have already accumulated abundant financial and cultural capitals in their homelands. Instead, they consider North American and European territories as vacation resorts, cultural or educational experiences, or shopping destinations. Those stories turn the Asian North American

context from the liminal space for possible Asian success to what French anthropologist Marc Augé calls a nonplace, where individuals do not attach significance to temporary habitats. How, then, does the concept of *Asianfail* apply to those Asian North Americans who are already outside the dominant paradigm of model minority?

Ultimately, *Asianfail* asserts a complex and diverse experience of failure and its related consequences in contemporary Asian North American literature and culture. In this, as Ty sums it up, her work is among many Asian American and Asian Canadian intellectual endeavors “to participate in the ongoing and much-needed dialogue about priorities and values for our society, global environment, and political identities in the twenty-first century” (136).

Jason Wang
York University