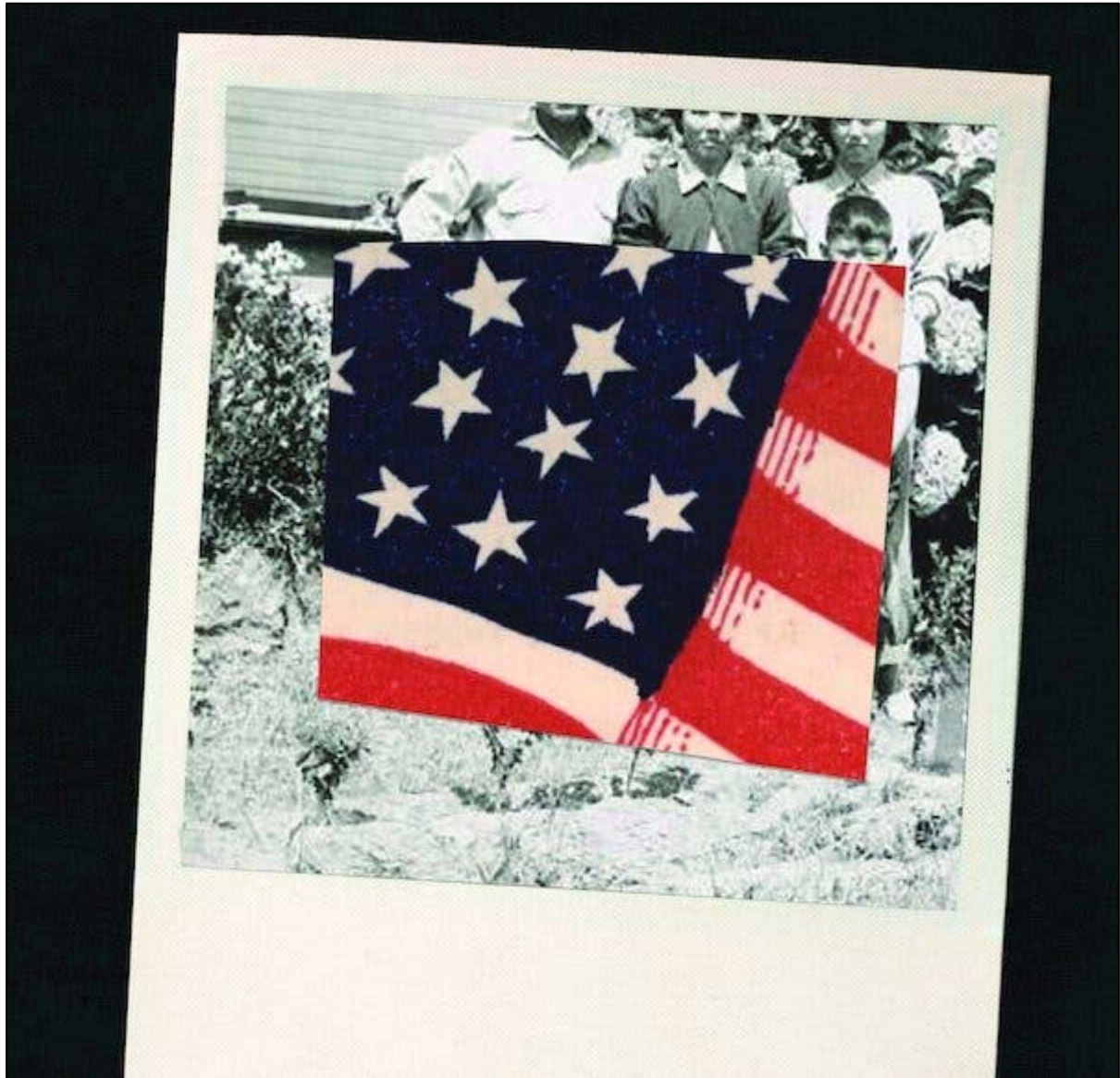


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OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

## The Beautiful, Flawed Fiction of ‘Asian American’



By Viet Thanh Nguyen  
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Mr. Nguyen is the author of the novels “The Sympathizer” and its sequel, “The Committed.” He is a professor of English, American studies and comparative literature at the University of Southern California.

One is not born an Asian American. It’s an identity that is inherently political, and must be chosen. Before college, I had never even heard of the term, but I vividly remember the moment that I became Asian American.

I was raised in multicultural San Jose, Calif., during the late 1970s and 1980s, among Mexican Americans and working-class white people. My family and I were refugees from Vietnam and the war fought there, but all I knew of the history that had brought us and many of our neighbors to the United States was what Hollywood told me. It confused me and shamed me to see people who looked like my parents being reduced to wordless masses, condemned to be killed, raped, rescued or silenced.

When my parents talked about Americans, they meant other people, not us, but I felt American, as well as Vietnamese. My parents could use “Oriental” without self-consciousness, but I could not. Something struck me as wrong about that word, but I didn’t know what it was until I studied Asian American history and literature at the University of California, Berkeley. There I learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act, the internment of Japanese Americans, the colonization of the Philippines, the annexation of Hawaii, the often forgotten presence of Korean and Indian immigrants in the early 20th century, the signs that said “No Dogs or Filipinos Allowed” and the experiences of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian and Hmong people during and after the Indochina wars.

That’s when I became Asian American. And the overwhelming emotion that I felt on learning this history was rage. Muhammad Ali said that “writing is fighting” — and I wanted to write and fight, especially after I discovered that Asian Americans had been writing and fighting in English since the late 19th century: the sisters Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna, Carlos Bulosan, John Okada, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston and many more.

I didn’t learn about them before because racism isolates us, disempowers us and erases our history. One solution is to find others and discover strength in our stories and our numbers. In high school, my Asian friends and I jokingly called ourselves “the Asian invasion” because that was all the language we had. In college, I joined the Asian American Political Alliance. There I learned that the term “Asian American” was invented in California by Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee when they formed the group in 1968.

“Asian American” was a creation — and those who say that there are no “Asians” in Asia are right. But neither is there an “Orient” or “Orientals” — those fantastic figments of the Western imagination, as Edward Said argued. Against this racist and sexist fiction of the Oriental, we built the anti-racist, anti-sexist fiction of the Asian American. We willed ourselves into being, but as with every other act of American self-conjuring, we became marked by a contradiction between American aspiration and American reality.

On the one hand, Asian Americans have long insisted that we are patriotic and productive Americans. This self-defense often leans on the model minority myth and the idea that Asian Americans have succeeded in fields such as medicine and technology because we immigrated with educational credentials and we raise our children to work hard. But Asian Americans are also haunting reminders of wars that killed millions of people and generated many refugees. And Asian Americans have come to satisfy the American need for cheap, exploitable labor — from working on railroads to giving pedicures. We were and are perceived to be competitors in a capitalist economy fractured by divisions of race, gender and class and the ever-widening gap of inequality that affects all Americans.

These roles that we play, and the contradictions they represent, aren't going anywhere. As long as the United States remains committed to aggressive capitalism domestically and aggressive militarism internationally, Asians and Asian Americans will continue to be scapegoats who embody threat and aspiration, an inhuman "yellow peril" and a superhuman model minority.

No claim to American belonging will end the vulnerability of Asian Americans to racism and cyclical convulsions of violence. And what does it even mean to claim belonging in the United States? If we belong to this country, then this country belongs to us, every part of it, including its systemic anti-Black racism and its colonization of Indigenous peoples and land. Like wave after wave of newcomers to this country before, Asian immigrants and refugees learned that absorbing and repeating anti-Black racism helps in the assimilation process. And like the European settlers, Asian immigrants and refugees aspire to the American dream, whose narrative of self-reliance, success and property accumulation is built on the theft of land from Indigenous peoples.

"Asian American" has now morphed into a newer fiction: the "Asian American and Pacific Islander" community, or A.A.P.I. But again, there are contradictions inherent in this identity. Pacific Islanders — Hawaiians, Samoans, the Chamorro of Guam — have been and remain colonized by the United States, with Hawaii and Guam serving as sites for major American military bases that project power in the Pacific and Asia. "A.A.P.I." is a staple of the lofty rhetoric and pragmatic corporate language of diversity and inclusion, but it also tends to gloss over the United States' long history of violence and conquest. It's not only railroads and internment that are central to A.A.P.I. experience; so is the colonization of Hawaii, masked by the tourist fantasy of an island paradise.

Now we applaud the success stories of Asian American billionaires, politicians, movie stars and influencers and the popularity of our cultural commodities, from boba to BTS. We raise each other up through networking — in the hope that embracing global capitalism, the idea of meritocracy and corporate culture will make us belong in the United States. But belonging will get us only so far, for belonging always involves exclusion.

We should look to other ideals: solidarity, unity and decolonization. Colonization and racism divide and conquer, telling the subjugated that they have nothing in common. That's why unity is crucial, and a broader unity can grow from the solidarity we have expressed with one another as Asian Americans, the force that pulled together such disparate peoples and experiences. That will to find kinship can be the basis for further solidarities — with everyone else shaped by colonization's global impact, its genocide and slavery, racism and capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity.

This is the only way that an Asian American-Pacific Islander coalition makes sense — pointing the way toward alliances with other groups, from Black Americans to Muslims, Latinos to L.G.B.T.Q. people. Asian Americans are one political identity among the many that must come together for decolonization.