

Sze-Wei Ang, *The State of Race: Asian/American Fiction after World War II*. New York, SUNY Press, 2019. 200 pp. ISBN13: 978-1-4384-7501-1.

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Sze-Wei Ang's *The State of Race: Asian/American Fiction after World War II* consists of an introduction and two chapters devoted to Malaysian literature, sandwiched between chapters primarily focused on Asian/American fiction, followed by a very brief epilogue. The headings for each of the main chapters indicate different types of trope.

Chapter one offers a reading of Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* in relation to "Tropes of Exemplarity." The novel's narrator and protagonist, Doc Hata, is regarded at least at first glance as an exemplar of the concept of "model minority." He has the ability to fit in or pass – in the past as Japanese during Japan's wartime occupation of Korea and later as an American in the United States. Ang uses Hata's case to demonstrate how race can become less a question of biology and more a function of how individuals are subjected to and manoeuvre themselves in relation to state power or how "race matters to the state" (43).

If the state looks favourably on successful businessmen, Hata will be a successful businessman; and if it is in his interest to conceal his foreignness, he will do his best to conceal it. Although he must recognize that he himself has power and can abuse it (in Korea, with the comfort women; and in Bedley Run, with Sonny, his adopted daughter), Hata seems even more attuned to the power that the state has over him. Although "exemplarity" may best be thought of as embodied in the state's desire for "moral goodness" (56), Ang points out that this goodness only has to exist on the outside; so that most people will be "less inclined to see bodies of color as potential threats" (57). Wearing the mask of "moral goodness," thus, comes at a price because it creates a false exemplarity. As he embodies the Asian/American model minority stereotype only on the outside, Hata is always faced with the possibility that in his posturing, he may one day be found out. On the other side of the mask, therefore, considerable anxiety is always lurking.

The flip-side of anxiety is security, the subject matter of chapter four. Here, however, a sense of security for Asian Americans turns out to be illusory. Ang begins by turning to an incident in Gish Jen's novel, *The Love Wife*, in which white Americans confront a Chinese American couple, Jibao and Lan, over the right of access to a portion of private beach. The white locals eventually set fire to the house in which the couple are staying, resulting

in Jibao's death. Ang claims that "the racial fears" triggering this tragedy are a "response to Asia's growing economic power as a result of globalization" (120). The white locals are tacitly incensed that the American Dream is no longer accessible only to whites. Ang insists that when "foreigners" are seen to have achieved considerable upward mobility, in the eyes of whites the state is regarded as weak. This leads to a rise in racially-motivated acts of violence.

Ang claims that the American Dream has gone global, and she goes on to provide a plethora of examples of its global reach, singling out in particular the rise of Asian millionaires and billionaires and "threats to US global power" (142) before turning to Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea*. Here, as the novel initially presents a post-racial utopia, it may be thought that racial anxiety has been vanquished; but Ang makes it clear that utopian and dystopian elements are interspersed. She rightly suggests that "what is dystopian to the state's subjects is utopian to the state" (144) and that the supposedly "postracial" has actually been unable to rid itself of the racial. The utopian/dystopian state's majority – just like the white majority in Jen's *The Love Wife* – will always be anxious about incremental increases in minorities' power stemming from globalization.

The chapters on Malaysian literature focus mainly on Han Suyin's *And the Rain My Drink* and Mohd Aswan Md. (Shaz) Johar's *Sancturia*. The former seems to provide Ang with another exemplar of the "model minority": the narrator and well-educated and respectable Chinese Malaysian doctor, Suyin, juxtaposed with uneducated Ah Mei, a former terrorist who seems to fit the "terrorist-spy" stereotype. All is not as it seems, however, and Ang deftly distinguishes between Suyin as character and Suyin as narrator, arguing that she fits the model minority stereotype much better in the former role than in the latter (80). Here, in discussing *And the Rain*, Ang forges links between race and morality, especially as individuals in this novel tend to see themselves and others as raced in line with colonial and later postcolonial forms of stereotyping.

Ang also indicates how other Malaysian writers, including Tan Twan Eng and Tash Aw, also incorporate "model minority" and "terrorist-spy" stereotypes in their works of fiction and generally show a keen awareness of racial stereotyping. Malaysian literature stands out, for Ang, as being in a very strong position to convey the anxiety caused by tensions between race, state, and nationhood — both during the colonial and postcolonial periods, including imagined futures. Thus Ang reads the flawed utopia/commune become authoritarian state, described in Shaz Johar's *Sancturia*, as encapsulating "the state's desires to protect its power, and the role race plays in the process" (91). As individuals succumb to the belief in racial stereotypes – for example, "the smart and capable but ultimately untrustworthy and destructive Chinese" (93) – the power of the state wanes.

After a long section on the complex ties between nationalism, race, and religion in Malaysia, noting, for example, “Chinese conversions to Islam as a way to ‘*masuk Melayu*’ (become Malay)” (107), Ang returns to *And the Rain* and connects it to Brian Gomez’s *Devil’s Place*. “From the 1950s to the early 2000s,” writes Ang, “racial stereotypes continue to populate Malaysia’s national imaginary; in both novels, racial anxiety is not only the feature of the decolonizing state, but also the state under globalization” (111).

Through readings of certain Asian-American and Malaysian novels Ang’s *The State of Race* provides a convincing argument for re-conceptualizing race in relation to state power and is particularly compelling on the anxieties not only experienced by racial minorities but also by those in the majority who have to exist in relation to these minorities. Race-based anxiety or insecurity can spread from the top down, particularly in an age of globalization.

Specifying “Asian/American Fiction” in the title of the book, however, is misleading as so much of the book is grounded in Malaysian literature. Ang also insists that she is writing about “minor literature.” This is a term with very complex theoretical ramifications. Literary works should not be considered minor because they are written by minorities. And who is to judge what is minor and what is major? It could be that a number of works examined in *The State of Race* will be considered “major” in the years to come, for reasons as yet unknown.