

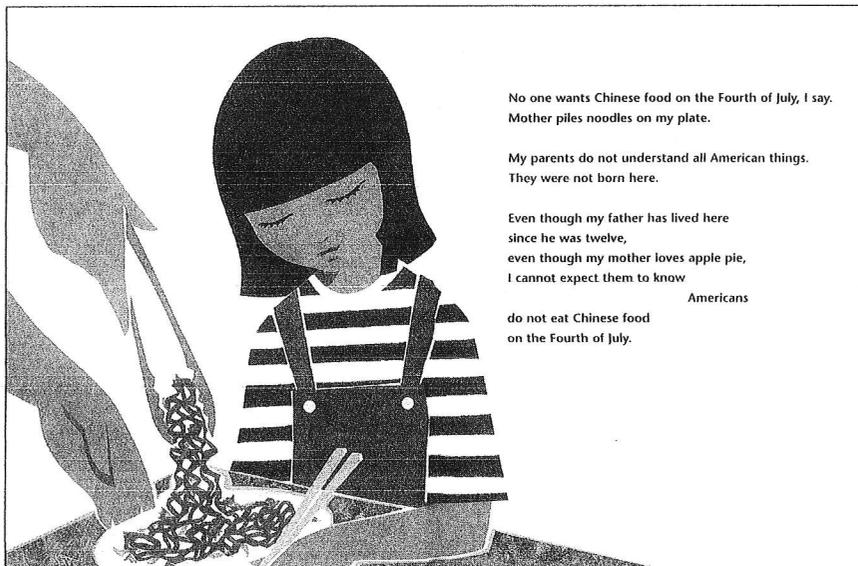
Alien Bunny Bots—or Not?

BY JANET WONG

Every once in a while I think about my “body of work.” It makes me feel important to think of my books in this way, and more than half of being an author is feeling important enough to believe that what you write deserves to be published. These ideas about my body of work usually come when I am starting to write a really stupid story about alien rabbits, a book that might have a chance of selling millions of copies and being turned into a movie with a Happy Meal stuffed character. My inner entrepreneur types the first chapter, but then my inner librarian warns that such a thing would not fit my body of work. I probably would have a much stronger body of work if only I could get past that stern, respectable librarian. It would be an uneven collection but also a more daring and varied shelfful. My inner librarian is quite firm: if anyone is to think of me a hundred years from now, it would be better for them to think of me as a multicultural poet, not the creator of *Alien Bunny Bots*.

People often describe me as a multicultural poet. I guess this is a good description. I am Asian, and I do sometimes write about being Asian. In the poem “Waiting at the Railroad Cafe” (from *Good Luck Gold*), I wrote about race discrimination taking the form of not being served in a restaurant; in “Noise” (also from *Good Luck Gold*), I wrote about being teased with a chant of “Ching chong Chinaman.” In “Other” (from *A Suitcase of Seaweed*), I wrote about seeing another Asian person in a room, the only other Asian person, and “recognizing my self in one quick glance.” There are a number of poems in those books that mention items from Asian culture: firecrackers, chopsticks, dim sum, kim chi, tea. There are poems that refer to less-obvious aspects of Asian culture, too: shame, showing respect, the expectation that kids will get straight A’s.

Some of my picture books also have multicultural content. *Apple Pie 4th of July* is about a girl’s resentment of her Chinese immigrant



No one wants Chinese food on the Fourth of July, I say.
Mother piles noodles on my plate.

My parents do not understand all American things.
They were not born here.

Even though my father has lived here
since he was twelve,
even though my mother loves apple pie,
I cannot expect them to know

Americans

do not eat Chinese food
on the Fourth of July.

parents who, in her view, fail to understand what being American is all about. *This Next New Year* shows that some people—including Singaporean immigrants and children of Hopi descent—celebrate the lunar new year with red envelopes, while others might celebrate it with takeout Thai food.

If I had to pick the one thing that defines who I am, though, it would not be my Asian heritage. Several years ago, I visited a school where there were very few Asians. An eager boy, desperate to be selected as a volunteer, shouted, “Pick me! I’m Korean!” I felt forced to address this. I did, by responding, “Yes, I am Korean. And Chinese. But I am also someone born and raised in sunny California who now lives in Seattle, city of rain. I am short. Fat. Horribly nearsighted. If you want to know who I really am, I am an eater. I come from the culture of salt and oil. The culture of potato chips.” When I think of that answer now, I cringe at my flip attitude. In my defense, I gave my little speech in a humorously exaggerated tone of voice. As a footnote, I truly could talk to you for hours about chips—my grammar school preference for Ruffles (“R-R-Ruffles Have Ridges”), my discovery of Pringles in junior high, my exploration beyond the world of the potato as I dallied with Doritos (nacho cheese flavor), my macrobiotic health food hippie cravings for seaweed-vegetable chips fried in canola oil (with 99% of the oil removed by centrifugal force). Bitten by the yuppie culture of the 1990s, I had a Yukon Gold phase. When I lived in Seattle, the “regional pride thing” made Tim’s Cascade my

favorite. Now that I am living in South Jersey, I've switched to Grandma Utz.

In most parts of the world, if you ask someone under thirty to tell you what they know of American culture, they will mention McDonald's, then Nike, then the name of a show on TV. Thinking back to my own childhood, my strongest American cultural memories are, indeed, of fast food, shopping, and TV. Right now I can almost evoke the smells, in a Proustian way, of a Taco Bell bean-and-cheese burrito, a Big Mac, and Pizza Hut pepperoni pizza. I remember my first pair of Levi's 501 jeans, and can recount my progression from Keds to Converse to Nike to New Balance shoes from third grade through college. I can hum you the opening tunes from "The Flintstones," "Gilligan's Island," and "The Brady Bunch." If this doesn't prove that I was an all-American kid, what does?

What a bland and boring people, Americans—if this is all we are. What is it they say? "White bread." (Note: While I wrote those words with some disdain, I must admit that I did love my Wonder Bread as a child, precisely because of its unobtrusive neutrality, its lovely—OK—blandness.) But obviously this is not all we are, here in the Great American Shopping Cart. Thanks to multicultural education, we now appreciate that while some of us are Wonder Bread, there are also among us the crusty sourdough, the sprouted grain, the pumpernickel rye—as well as tortillas, polenta, cous-cous, grits, pita, naan, and rice.

American children are becoming, increasingly, true citizens of the world, familiar with these global staples and able to distinguish between guacamole and wasabi because of the supplemental multicultural education that many families undertake outside of school, an effort to be applauded even if it is usually limited to an "international deli" sort of curriculum. (The guacamole/wasabi mix-up happened, unfortunately, to an old immigrant Italian neighbor of mine, at a cocktail party in California.) Inside school, multicultural education sometimes brings in African drummers or Korean dancers but is usually limited to a weeklong "foreign country report" or reading stories presenting a glorified history about everyday life "back in grandma's day," when life supposedly had more flavor and texture and substance.

I have written one of those glorified histories: *The Trip Back Home*, a picture book in which I revisit the quiet, steady days of my grandparents in rural Korea. Mornings were filled with feeding the furnace and the pigs, working in the fields or shopping in the farmers' market, and cooking together. Afternoons were spent bent over handiwork. Evenings had the whole family gathered in

a circle to play cards or tell stories, or read. Theirs was a world of homemade gifts: a charcoal drawing of the hills behind the house, persimmons picked from the tree.

The fact that this life took place on a farm in Korea is just a detail, though. This farm could have been anywhere: in Mexico, or Africa, or Tuscany. Actually, this book could have taken place in almost any one of these United States of America. But would it still be called a “multicultural book” if it had been given a rural Texas setting? Yes, I think, but only if the characters were nonwhite. If the characters were Latinos in Texas, or African Americans in Georgia, or Lakotas in North Dakota, or white but “different”—Amish in Ohio—it could have been considered multicultural. But with third-generation Anglos, it would be described simply as a book about “life on a farm.” No one would call the Smith-family version of *The Trip Back Home* a “book about America,” but everyone thinks of the Chung-family version as a “book about Korea.”

This disturbs me for two reasons. First, the fact that a Smith-family version would not be considered “multicultural” (while a Martinez- or Chung-family version would) makes the Smith-family version seem the norm, while the other versions are, well, other. Children need to learn to recognize Anglo cultural elements in what is considered “regular American society” and to analyze



which of those elements truly are unique. Until that happens, the rest of us non-Anglos will suffer the stigma of irregularity.

The second reason I am disturbed is this: the characterization of *The Trip Back Home* as a multicultural book about Koreans thrusts an unfair burden on the book; as such, the book is expected to represent "the Korean experience," which it does not. A Korean graduate student studying in Pennsylvania for a year confronted me about this. Quite upset, she blurted out, "The way you show Korea is wrong; Korea is not like that." I guessed, correctly, that she was from the bustling metropolis of Seoul. I explained that back in 1967 when I visited my grandparents' house in rural Korea, it still did not have indoor plumbing, so the book truly reflects what I saw, including the fact that my grandparents often wore traditional Korean dress although my mother wore modern Western clothes. In a rather dejected way, the woman from Seoul meekly suggested that I should write another book to show how beautiful and vibrant her country's capital is.

But I can't write that book. And I'm not interested in writing that book. The Seoul-woman should write that book. Why not? She has childhood stories to tell. It might be, though, that her stories have nothing to do with Korea itself but everything to do with growing up in a family of musicians or athletes or readers. Maybe her best "bustling city of Seoul" story is about getting lost in a department store at age five.

A disclaimer: while I do not want to be restricted to writing "multicultural work," in all honesty I am not averse to making use of my cultural advantages, either. I have accepted numerous speaking invitations that have come solely from the fact that I am Asian. I gladly accepted the first Asian Pacific American Librarians' Award for *The Trip Back Home*; the only thing that bothers me about that award is how few people know it exists. Am I a conveniently multicultural poet? Or simply inconsistent?

I'd like to think the inconsistency can be explained by the difference between self-determination and determination by others. Tall boys who are expected to love basketball, the Andrew who is routinely called "Andy," and frog collectors sick of receiving dozens of ordinary frog doodads for every possible occasion might understand what I mean. Nobody likes to be told who to be and what to do; choice makes all the difference.

Lately, choice for me has taken the form of writing books that feature characters of ambiguous race, who might or might not be Asian or part-Asian (until later identified as such). *Minn and Jake* contains not a single mention of race or ethnicity; we learn only in

the sequel (as I just wrote it, this past summer) that Jake is one-quarter Korean. Minn expresses shock when she meets Jake's Korean grandmother in Los Angeles. "Why didn't you tell me you're Asian?" she asks. His response: "Have you ever told me you're white?"

Another book of mine with a character who could be part Asian (from the illustrations, not the text) is *Alex and the Wednesday Chess Club*. This book seems to have found a particular audience among Asian and Eastern European immigrant families, chess being particularly popular in China and Russia—and so it might invite a "multicultural" classification. More properly, though, it might be called "postmulticultural," an increasingly popular term that I use simply to mean "multicultural in its appeal or in a nonobvious or incidental way." Dim sum is multicultural; pickled pigs' feet would be postmulticultural.

This identity-wrestling aside, my current favorite work-in-progress is an anthology of Asian American poems and paintings for young children. My inner entrepreneur is worried. She warns that there have been several excellent anthologies of Asian American literature published in these last two decades, and most of them are out of print. Nothing, however, has been published for the very young, in an illustrated format, and there are thousands of first, second, and third graders who need this sort of book. They need it so that they do not become like the fourth grader who inspired this anthology. She was a sweet adopted Chinese girl raised in rural white America whose librarian brought her up to meet me after the assembly. During a five-minute conversation about writing and travel, the girl announced, "I won't get married." Then, in a low voice, she added, "No one would want to marry me, anyway—because I'm Chinese."

No one from her town; that must be what she meant. But she needs someone, or something, to show her how she fits in beyond her town. This book of poems could be that something, where other books have failed. That is the hope, each time: that each book will mean a whole new world for someone who needs it. A few of the poets and artists asked if their submissions for the anthology needed to be "Asian-themed." I told them no, of course. My inner librarian approves.

Janet Wong (www.janetwong.com) is the author of sixteen books for children. Her latest is *Before It Wiggles Away*, a "Meet the Author" book published in November 2006 by Richard C. Owen Books.