

Masticating Adrian Tomine

Viet Thanh Nguyen

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is the title of a famous Joyce Carol Oates short story. The second half of the question marks my criterion for an essential Asian American literary text. By now, we have a long list of Asian American books that could be called essential, mostly because they fall under the part of the question that asks where Asian American literature has been. But since it is just as fruitful to ask where Asian American literature is headed, my pick is Adrian Tomine’s *Summer Blonde* (2002), a book not yet masticated by Asian American literary critics. Perhaps it never will be, but I think Tomine’s day to be chewed upon will come fairly soon. He has significant street cred as a comic artist, or a graphic writer, or a picture poet, and now has increasing mainstream visibility via his *New Yorker* covers.

My formal fuzziness in describing him is matched by his racial blurriness. I didn’t know Tomine was a Japanese American when I read his early work, *Sleepwalk and Other Stories* (1998) and *32 Stories* (1995). These stories had no explicitly Asian American content, adding to my confusion in studying his early tiny author photographs. I couldn’t perform the vaunted ethnic profiling that many Asian Americans (not so) jokingly pride themselves on. His genus appeared less Asian American and more

could be called Asian American today is of the kind that makes us doubt whether we know what an Asian American is when we see one. This is not to say that there isn’t plenty of good literature that registers under the old optics, the customary ones we wake up with and which feel natural in the light of day. Rather, it’s to say that slipping on new optics will aid us to see in the dim and murky world of racial and sexual negotiation in the US, where we must feel our way towards an uncertain future.

The exciting work in literature that could be called Asian American today is of the kind that makes us doubt whether we know what an Asian American is when we see one.

Summer Blonde shows that race isn’t what we think it is, and that race isn’t all that there is to see. There are four stories, only one of which, “Hawaiian Getaway,” features a clearly Asian character, the not-so-nice Hilary Chan (see figure 1). But while the other three aren’t explicitly about Asian Americans—no ethnic names, no oppressive Asian mothers,

no Asian accents and weird English grammar, no trips to see Asian American independent movies, all in *Shortcomings*—I wonder if they could be. Without narrative clues or the sonic sabotage of an accent, how do we know what an Asian American is, looks like, sounds like? Let’s peek at this character, Carlo,

from the title story (see figure 2). He’s a macho musician with a string of girlfriends, a description already unusual in terms of the behavior of typical Asian American male literary characters. Besides his atypical behavior, can we tell that he *isn’t* an Asian American just by looking at him? If the story told you he’s Filipino, would he be Asian? If the story told you he was of mixed-race descent, would he be Asian? But the story tells us nothing about him in regards to his race, and I have no idea what race Tomine intends him to be. In the end, Tomine’s intention, while nice to know, is also irrelevant. The plasticity of the comic form he engages in is utterly suited to Carlo’s racial ambiguity and the shape-shifting quality of race for Asian Americans today. Sometimes Asian Americans are the kind of people who come to dinner, and sometimes they are the kind of people who deliver the dinner. So much depends on how Asian Americans are looked at, how the lines of their faces are filled in by the viewer. Comics make this problem

of perception both visible and invisible. As Scott McCloud demonstrated vividly in *Understanding Comics* (1993), the picture is powerful because it compels us to fill in missing information to make sense of it, without knowing that we are even doing so. We see ☺ and we assume that it’s a smiley face, a human face, even though it looks nothing like a real face. Now erase those ☺ and replace them with these ☹ and our glued-on optics interpret this as an Asian face, even though many Asians don’t have those kinds of slanted eyes.

Summer Blonde subtly asks us to reconsider our visual reflex of race by juxtaposing “Hawaiian Getaway,” where Asian American content is present, and the other stories, where Asian American content is absent. Absence becomes notable in contrast to presence, a contrast that in turn magnifies Tomine’s ambiguous Asian American status. This magnification is important, for so far as Asian American literary criticism is concerned, the author isn’t really dead. While Asian American literary critics have worked on the assumption that Asian American literature is written by and about Asian Americans, the fact that more and more Asian American authors are writing about non-Asian Americans means that the “about” part as a criterion is certainly finished. But the “by” part isn’t. It’s the author, as an Asian American, that justifies Asian American literature. I don’t see a future where Asian American literary critics embrace Arthur Golden, David Guterson, or Robert Olen Butler as authors of Asian American literature. They cannot be Asian Americans, according to the complicated history of race in the US, and they don’t look like Asian Americans. We think we know race when we see it, even if we don’t, as so many cases of mistaken identity, manipulated identity, false identity, and changeable identity have shown. The problem for an Asian American literature composed purely of the written word is that there is no formal way for it to deal with race’s visual dimension, only its narrative dimension. This is where Tomine’s pictorial work in *Summer Blonde* has the advantage over written literature. He not only writes and rewrites the stories of race, but draws and redraws the look of race as well.

Viet Thanh Nguyen is an associate professor of English and American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (2002). He is writing a scholarly book on war and memory and a collection of short stories, two of which are forthcoming in *TriQuarterly* and *Narrative*.



Figure 1

Copyright 2009 Adrian Tomine. Image Courtesy of Drawn & Quarterly.

some hybrid of geek, emo, alternative, and hipster. But Tomine’s name was a clue that perhaps he was “ethnic” of some kind, perhaps of mixed-race descent or via adoption. My blurred vision concerning his racial identity makes him an unusual suspect as the author of an essential Asian American book, since Asian American literary criticism functions upon a fairly simple logic when defining Asian American literature: it usually features Asian Americans, and it is always written by Asian Americans.

This seemingly clear definition requires that we know what an Asian American is, does, believes in, looks like. Tomine’s work questions these assumptions, and until his most recent book, *Shortcomings* (2007), which cracked *The New York Times* Notable Books List, I’d have felt uneasy calling Tomine an Asian American writer. I didn’t want to impose an identity he didn’t exhibit in his work. But in *Shortcomings*, Tomine depicts, with considerable wit and irony, the lives of Generasian Y, those young Asian Americans who grew up well aware of Asian American issues and regard Asian American identity as one of only many possible identities they can slip on. *Shortcomings* would be the obvious choice for an essential Asian American text from Tomine because of its Asian American content, recognizable in the names of the characters and the way they identify themselves as Asians. It’s because the book is obviously racial that I didn’t pick it. For me, the exciting work in literature that



Figure 2

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