Immigrant Act
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Every discourse that breeds fault and guilt is a discourse of authority and arrogance. To say this, however, is not to say that all power discourses produce equal oppression or that those established are necessary.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha

Since academia fancies its business to be the measurement and management of reality, imagination usually gets a bad rap. In a
Derridean sense, the word carries the trace of its use as a descriptor marking activities appropriate for early childhood (remember Dr. Spock's characterization of preschoolers as "virtuosos of imagination"?). We're expected to outgrow this developmental stage—Dr. Spock reminds parents that since preschoolers are not "sure where the real ends and the unreal begins" (which is why they love stories), it is the job of good parents to "point out that what he said isn't actually so, although he may wish it were so. In this way, you're helping your child learn the difference between reality and make-believe" (169). Somehow this trace of childish confusion that the word "imagination" always bears precludes its serious use in much radical discourse. No, changing the world is grim business indeed for teachers and students and writers, requiring at best a "militant optimism" (Yoon 735).

I was cheered, then, to see Hyoejin Yoon making an unabashed case for imagination in "Affecting the Transformative Intellectual: Questioning ‘Noble’ Sentiments in Critical Pedagogy and Composition." By calling us to examine how "institutional discourses, even radical ones, keep our work and our imaginations and other real possibilities bound," she reintroduces imagination as intellectual praxis (734). Yoon's piece persuasively establishes the role affect and its material consequences play in the composition of unimaginative critical stances. My response begins with her challenge to "imagine new subjects, and perform new affective stances in our struggle to make meaning and exercise agency," specifically by "considering race, affect, and critical pedagogy through the lens of citizenship" (736). I hope to suggest one "how" for this "what" Yoon calls us to imagine.

In his study of Asian American cinema, Identities in Motion, Peter Feng discusses cinema's role in defining "what it means to be American, including the conditions that Asian Americans must meet to be considered American," contending that "cinema is thus not a technology of reality but of fantasy: rather than depict the way things are, it shows us the way things could be" (2). Yoon's choice to construct the imagining of new subjects as cinematic praxis—she asks us to consider race, affect, and critical pedagogy "through
the lens" of citizenship—immediately calls to mind Feng's central claim that

movies do not merely reflect social formations, nor is identity produced by movies (and injected into society). . . . [Rather,] identities are ultimately mobilized within the spectator. It is after all the human mind that receives twenty-four still images per second (thirty in the case of video) and perceives motion where there is none. . . . Just as the human mind animates still images, so does the spectator receive cinematic discourse on identity and put it into motion. If the discourse seems to reside in the movies themselves and not in the spectator, that is because cinema is not a neutral medium but a system that implicates maker and audience in a network of power. (3)

As Feng suggests, we supply what it takes to fill the space between each frame; we create the unbroken, coherent, moving picture. Feng's work shares not only a thematic link with Yoon's work—both in part examine the ways "citizen" and "Asian American" are produced in relation to each other—but a conceptual link as well. For me, Feng's explanation of how imagination works cinematically serves to demystify it; he reveals the intellectual dimension of fantasy, which in turn suggests to me a specific strategy for carrying out Yoon's challenge. Extending Feng's metaphorical use of the physiological process of making movies, I would argue that affects are particularly powerful discourses of identity with which we put the still frames of human lives into motion. Yoon demonstrates as much when arguing that

\textit{pathos} can be seen at work not only in the content of the discourse [of critical pedagogy], but in assertions of faith that . . . [rely] on stirring readers' moral associations with these abstract concepts. Indeed, such affects interpellate teachers into appealing self-projections. What teacher wouldn't want to see herself as dedicated, doing something special that will be deep and abiding? (732)

I experienced Yoon's symptomatic reading of Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux's work in particular as an interruption of the physiol-
ogy of movie making. Yoon slows down the appealing self-
projection of the transformative intellectual until we see it for what
it is—a collection of still images animated by the same emotionology
as “whiteness,” Catherine Fox’s somewhat clunky term for affec-
tive stances that construct and maintain a white supremacist racial
hierarchy: self-righteousness projected by subjects occupying
stances of intellectual and moral superiority, stances composed
from habitual feelings of authority, nobility, rightness, goodness,
justness, trustworthiness, and rationality. With this interruption,
Yoon demonstrates the first step of imagining as intellectual praxis.
The next step is to set new subjects into motion, to show what could
be, by reanimating these still images with a different emotionology.

Yoon’s demonstration had an emotional effect on me as a
reader—with its affective glue revealed, this repeat screening of
The Transformative Intellectual made me very bored and very
grouchy. This is a good thing—a very, very good thing. I think it
shows the degree to which Yoon’s argument succeeds—though
familiar with the critiques feminists and critical race theorists have
made of critical pedagogy, by having to acknowledge the self-
righteousness required to animate that figure Yoon made me
confront the tediousness of my own always-lingering whitely
pathos and ethos. Who is this “bad” teacher that I also invoke and
define myself against? Yoon puts more and more pressure on this
straw figure until the “bad” teacher collapses, revealed as a
convenient, fantastic foil. I bored myself with remembered perfor-
mances of self-righteousness, the kind of boredom that fosters
grouchy restlessness, a frustration with the same and a desire for
the different.

My own study of affect has taken me to Buddhist texts, where
I’ve encountered Thich Nhat Hahn’s argument that “feelings are
formations, impermanent and without substance,” “habit energy”
that we can use in destructive or productive ways (Heart 178;
Anger 38). Thus, he encourages us to “learn not to identify
ourselves with our feelings, not to consider them as a self, not to
seek refuge in them, not to die because of them”; instead, he calls
us to “identify [an emotion’s] roots as being in our body, our
perceptions, or our deep consciousness. Understanding a feeling is the beginning of its transformation" (*Heart* 178). In my case, understanding self-righteousness as “habit energy” allows me to see how I can take refuge in it, how I can identify with it, how it shapes my perceptions of myself in relation to others. Understanding self-righteousness as “habit energy” also allows me to transform it; when I see what purpose it has served, I can form a different habit of feeling with that energy. Moving from self-righteousness to boredom to grouchiness makes me hopeful; it shows me the energy can be used differently to create different affective stances and different paths of action.

My curiosity is piqued, but I am still unsure what this “lens of citizenship” that Yoon wants us to consider race, affect, and critical pedagogy with is (736). Let me use Amy Wan’s work to imagine one possibility. Wan examines how literacy programs have historically been a powerful means of inculcating and measuring to what degree potential citizens could perform the appropriate affect of “good” Americans (2). Wan helps articulate the ways in which literacy and affect are treated as “measureable” indicators of citizenship, demonstrating the enormous labor required to convincingly perform American citizenship—physical labor, linguistic labor, and affective labor (9). I think I can understand what the “lens of citizenship” is if I read Yoon’s argument as an argument about labor. Wan’s examination of literacy and Yoon’s examination of critical pedagogy reveal the same problematic figure: the good citizen whose publicly compelled and performed labor relies on an ideology of meritocracy, an ideology Wan and Yoon each suggest is belied by the visible presence of Asian American bodies that do not entirely belong.

I think one way to construct Yoon’s “lens of citizenship,” then, is to ask this (also somewhat clunky) question: What is the labor we perform and what is it about? This is a question I’ve been using to identify and question the affect shaping my work. My identity is profoundly shaped by my beliefs about work. In many of the ways Yoon describes, I work hard. Getting tenure has been an opportunity for me to rethink what kinds of work I do and what that work is
about. For example, a great deal of my work is about its public performance—making visible the quantity and quality of work I put into teaching, publication, and service. This has raised a number of questions I’ll quickly pose here, but they are not questions I’m intending to answer; in fact, I don’t think they can be answered. Labor is not neutral, nor is it practiced in neutral spaces; public and private labor, intellectual and emotional labor, physical and mental labor are all binaries obviously shaped by histories of race and class and gender. To what degree does my work make the spaces in which it is performed more or less democratic? What are the consequences of making my work public or private? What are the consequences of performing intellectual labor versus emotional labor? Physical versus mental labor? To what degree is each kind necessary for me to maintain my credentials as a good citizen? To interrupt the whitely affect such performances of good citizenship rely upon, I need to measure something else—or, better yet, stop measuring altogether.

I took the first version of this response in a different direction. Where Yoon argues that “Asian American cultural formations reflect a heterogeneity, showing contradictions and disidentifications with ‘national fictions of identity’ that ‘perfor[m] and imagin[e] a new subject,’” I responded with a call for a parallel project for recovering white transformative intellectuals, a call to perform self-ethnography that examines the affect we’ve used to animate the still images of our lives (Lowe 53 qtd. in Yoon 736; 736). I suggested that postcolonial feminist ethnographer Aihwa Ong’s contention that “we increasingly live inside, outside, and through East-West divisions” supplies a hypothesis for those of us not Asian American to apply to our own lives so we might do work that was complementary to the examination Yoon calls for. I slowed down my own self-projection and selected some still images to better examine my movement to, from, and through the Asian diaspora: Consumer, Exchange Student, ESL Teacher, Traveler, Ethnographer, Friend, Mentor, Professor of Rhetoric and Composition, Professor of Women’s Studies, Colleague, prospective Adoptive Parent.
I'm thinking now that this is not time or place to make that work public. It was important work, and I'm glad I did it. It revealed a lot about how much my work is informed by my desire for authority and recognition. And it revealed moments and spaces and opportunities where I've successfully created other affective stances. Keeping this work private makes it less visible (you'll have to take my word for it) and risks devaluing it (the more private any work is, particularly emotional work, the more feminized it is). But I can't imagine how not to make it another public performance of the "transformative intellectual as citizen extraordinaire" (Yoon 736). Perhaps I'm suffering from a failure of imagination. But I've given you the still images. I'll bet you can supply the discourse of identity, the emotionology, necessary to put me into motion as a projected, moving, whitely image. If you can do that, than that is probably an excellent indication that I do not need to publicly perform this work for you. But I did start this response by arguing for the possibility of reanimating the still images of our lives with different affects. That, perhaps, is the work I can imagine making public without making it a public performance of a nobler, better, more ideologically pure transformative intellectual ("Coming to a theatre near you—Ilene Crawford is Citizen Extraordinaire 2.0").

Trinh Minh-ha reminds us that "dominated and marginalized people have been socialized to see always more than their own point of view. In the complex reality of postcoloniality, it is therefore vital to assume one's radical "impurity" and to recognize the necessity of speaking from a hybrid place, hence of saying at least two, three things at a time" ("A Hybrid Place" 140). I am not exactly the dominated and marginalized subject Trinh is referencing, but I am impure and I do have some capacity to transform my point of view. Trinh's "hybrid place" is the place I feel I am in—able to animate the same series of still images (Consumer, Exchange Student, ESL Teacher, Traveler, Ethnographer, Friend, Mentor, Professor of Rhetoric and Composition, Professor of Women's Studies, Colleague, prospective Adoptive Parent) with alternative affects so they tell two or three possible stories, not only the familiar one. How can the second and third story offer more imaginative
possibilities than the first? How can the first remain as its own truth, perhaps a cautionary tale, perhaps a tale of habit energy transformed?

Similar to Trinh’s decision to locate herself in a hybrid place, Aihwa Ong locates herself “in between the spaces of Asian, American, and Chinese-ness; I cannot be fully at home in any one of them. I thus cling to the raft of ‘overseas Chinese’ as a way to express my position as one that always maintains a detached and skeptical attitude toward the singular claims of race, ethnicity, culture, nationhood” (352). Again, while I am not the exact subject Ong describes, I am skeptical and I do have some capacity to detach from home spaces and the identities associated with them; I don’t often feel “at home.”

“Specular Border Intellectual” might be the reanimated version of “The Transformative Intellectual.” As Ong makes clear in ways that Yoon’s, Wan’s, and, I should add, Morris Young’s work on citizenship echoes, immigration is about allegiance. Citing Abdul JanMohammed’s term “specular border intellectual,” Ong says this term describes intellectuals like herself who “refuse to be subjected to the allegiances tied to a single home country” (352). Ong argues that such intellectuals experience “homelessness-at-home” in the sense of “using their interstitial cultural space as a vantage point from with to define other political possibilities” (352). This is turning into an immigration story, then—not the story of the intellectual moving others, but the story of the intellectual in motion.

To what extent does Yoon’s challenge to “imagine new subjects, and perform new affective stances in our struggle to make meaning and exercise agency,” specifically by “considering race, affect, and critical pedagogy through the lens of citizenship” ask those of us who are white to give up citizenship and become immigrants (Yoon 736)? Is it just the stuff of fantasy to think we can? In many ways, yes. But Ong argues that “diasporic feminists (and we should all be somewhat mobile to be vigilant) should develop a denationalized and deterritorialized set of critical practices” (367). And citing Margaret Mead’s comment that “everyone is an immigrant in the twentieth century,” Ong holds out hope that
"perhaps everyone will be a postcolonist in the next" (368). To be a 21st century immigrant—a postcolonist—will require practicing what Ong describes as a "dialectic of disowning and reowning" that is, the "deliberate cultivation of a mobile consciousness" (368). This requires a proactiveness that is unlikely to just happen for white American citizens. We’re going to have to relocate ourselves physically, linguistically, and affectively to hurry that process along.

The roles of Consumer, Exchange Student, ESL Teacher, Traveler, Ethnographer, Friend, Mentor, Professor of Rhetoric and Composition, Professor of Women’s Studies, Colleague, prospective Adoptive Parent provide me with some very fraught and imperfect possibilities for that work. But they are all roles I proactively seized and used and transformed because they were the roles available to me at the time to claim and shape. How can I take those still images and reanimate them yet again now? I realize that meeting Yoon’s challenge not only requires me to project images to show their multiple meanings; it also requires me to remain cognizant of the historical and material conditions that allow me this fantasy of working as a Specular Border Intellectual, a very privileged kind of immigrant, but one that can potentially undermine whitely affect by asking, What is the labor I perform and what is it about? With Yoon’s encouragement, I’m seriously imagining the possibilities Asian American theorists offer.

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**Works Cited**


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