

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

GO HOME!

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"I read this book and see my people,
see us—and feel, in our collective
outsiderhood, at home."

—OCEAN VUONG,
Night Sky with Exit Wounds

"This timely collection is a bold,
eclectic chorus that provides an
invigorating antidote to the xeno-
phobia of our times."

—RUTH OZEKI,
A Tale for the Time Being

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Coolie (pp. 103, 106, 235, 236): commonly regarded as a pejorative and/or racial slur, a term that came into popularity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries denoting an unskilled laborer—primarily from South Asia, Southeast Asia, or China—hired for low or subsistence wages.

Desi (103): derived from the ancient Sanskrit word for “land” or “country,” a Hinglish term meaning “indigenous” or “authentic” often used to signify people, cultures, and products of Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi origin.

Hapa (2): derived from the Hawaiian word for “half,” a term used to denote someone of mixed ethnicity, usually those of partial Asian or Pacific Islander descent.

Gurkha Contingent (63): a department of the Singapore Police Force comprised primarily of Gurkhas, or Nepali soldiers temporarily hired by foreign governments and intergovernmental organizations. Created in 1949 for ex-British Army Gurkhas after Indian independence from the British Empire, the GC initially served as a neutralizing force in Singapore, quelling race riots, strikes, and trades union conflicts. In order to maintain social, political, and economic impartiality, Gurkhas do not integrate into Singaporean society—they are prohibited from marrying Singaporean women (and are thus permitted to bring their wives and children from Nepal to the secluded Gurkha base camp in Mount Vernon) and are expected to return to Nepal upon completion of their service.

Historical Events

Chinese Civil War (1927–1950): a war that lasted from April 1927 to May 1950 in China between the nationalist, Soviet-backed Kuomintang (KMT) government and the Western-backed Communist Party of China (CPC). The civil war began in 1927 following the Northern Expedition, continued intermittently until 1937 (when the two parties temporarily joined forces in the Second–Sino Japanese War), and resumed in 1945. Military hostilities ceased in 1950, by which time the CPC had gained control of mainland China and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC), effectively restricting the jurisdiction of the KMT’s Republic of China (ROC) to Taiwan, Penghu, Quemoy, Matsu, and several minor islands. Today, the PRC in mainland China and ROC in Taiwan continue to fight over diplomatic recognition, both governments claiming sole governance over all of China.

Iran-Contra Affair (1985–1897): a political scandal that occurred during the administration of US president Ronald Reagan, in which the National Security Council (NSC) facilitated secret arms sales to Iran in attempts to fund the Contras

(a right-wing militant group opposed to the democratic socialist Sandinista government in Nicaragua) and negotiate the release of seven American hostages held in Lebanon. The weapons transactions violated the arms embargo against Iran and the Boland Amendment, which prohibited further US government funding of the Contras.

Korean War (1950–1953): a conflict between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) that began in 1950 with the invasion of North Korean forces, supported by the former Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, in UN- and US-backed South Korea. With more than 2.5 million casualties, the fighting ended in July 1953 with the Korean Armistice Agreement, which established the demilitarized buffer zone and border barrier separating North Korea and South Korea. No peace treaty has been signed between the two Koreas, and both officially assert claim to the whole of the Korean peninsula.

Philippine-American War (1899–1902): a war between the First Philippine Republic and the United States that lasted from February 1899 to July 1902. The conflict came at the heels of the Spanish-American War of 1898, which resulted in Spain ceding its colony of the Philippines to the US in the Treaty of Paris. Fighting initially began at the 1899 Battle of Manila between American troops and Filipino nationalists, who, headed by Emilio Aguinaldo, sought Filipino independence rather than a colonial regime change. The Balangiga massacre (p. 113) refers to a 1901 incident in which Filipino guerilla forces attacked and killed 48 American soldiers in the town of Balangiga in the Samar province. In retaliation, American General Jacob Hurd Smith ordered the killing of every Balangiga male over ten years old, and was later subject to court-martial and forced to retire in 1902.

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears

Mohja Kahf

My grandmother puts her feet in the sink of the bathroom at Sears to wash them in the **ritual washing** for prayer, wudu, because she has to pray in the store or miss the mandatory prayer time for Muslims. She does it with great poise, balancing herself with one plump matronly arm against the automated hot-air hand dryer, after having removed her support knee-highs and laid them aside, folded in thirds, and given me her purse and her packages to hold so she can accomplish this **august ritual** and get back to the **ritual of shopping** for housewares.

→ Parallels ritual prayer washing and ritual of shopping (shopping as a kind of religious ritual?)

↑ notions of respectability and decorum as culturally specific

Respectable Sears matrons shake their heads and frown as they notice what my grandmother is doing, an affront to American porcelain, a contamination of **American Standards**.

↓ Muslim ritual as provocation/offense against American cultural convention

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→ Sears as icon of "American Standards" (humor? irony? link between sense of Americanness and consumerism?)

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

Locates the "clash of civilizations" in the banality of everyday life, i.e. in the etiquette practices of a department store bathroom

How is the foreign written as abject?

by something foreign and unhygienic requiring civic action and possible use of disinfectant spray. They fluster about and flutter their hands and I can see a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears bathroom

Foreignness figures as a corrupting force, a "contamination" that must be treated with the "disinfectant" of public policy

My grandmother, though she speaks no English, catches their meaning and her look in the mirror says, I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems. I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus over painted bowls imported from China among the best families of Aleppo. And if you Americans knew anything about civilization and cleanliness, you'd make wider washbins, anyway. My grandmother knows one culture—the right one,

Competing notions of propriety and social "rightness"

as do these matrons of the Middle West. For them, my grandmother might as well have been squatting in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor, Mexican or Middle Eastern, it doesn't matter which, when she lifts her well-groomed foot and puts it over the edge.

Other vs Self - lack of cultural distinction, conception of foreign as vague and generalizable

"You can't do that," one of the women protests, turning to me, "Tell her she can't do that."
"We wash our feet five times a day," my grandmother declares hotly in Arabic.
"My feet are cleaner than their sink."
Worried about their sink, are they? I should worry about my feet!"
My grandmother nudges me, "Go on, tell them."

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see
at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other
shoppers,
all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent
in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum
Even now my grandmother, not to be rushed,
is delicately drying her pumps with tissues from her purse
For my grandmother always wears well-turned pumps
that match her purse, I think in case someone
from one of the best families of Aleppo
should run into her—here, in front of the Kenmore display

→ How is Kahf
employing irony
here?

I smile at the midwestern women
as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about
them
and shrug at my grandmother as if they
had just apologized through me
No one is fooled, but I

How does the
multicultural
speaker figure
as a conciliatory
force, mediating
the interaction
between grandmother
and sales associates—
between East and West?

hold the door open for everyone
and we all emerge on the sales floor
and lose ourselves in the great common ground
of housewares on markdown.

→ Commonality founded
in shared consumer
identity? United across
culture in search of
biggest bargain?

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

From "The Words Honey and Moon" ...
By Jennifer Tseng

wanted to go, but his principles outweighed his adoration for her and he drove on.

When they arrived at the Motel 6 in Des Moines, she refused to get out of the car. "Why do we always have to stay at Motel 6? I don't want to stay at another one." She had her sandaled feet on the dash to spite him and was looking at the map through the slits of her eyes as if plotting an alternate route.

"Motel 6, what's the problem? We have reservations." Woo didn't understand. What a nice clean motel! The night before had been particularly tender and unsatisfying and their daytime personalities were revolting.

"I don't mind staying in a few here and there, but every single time? What will people think?"

"What people?!" Woo shouted, incredulous.

And then, for the first time since their journey west had begun, Camille understood that she was stranded. There were no other people. No Heartland, no mother, no father, no movie dates or trinkets, white rabbits or dried plums—just a husband. She began to cry.

There was nothing, aside from sex and communism, that frightened Woo more than tears and so while Camille wept over the road atlas, he went into the Motel 6 office and canceled their reservations. He got on Interstate 80 going west and began searching for signs to Lake Anita.

It was at Lake Anita (for which he had silently sacrificed the highly touted Badger Creek) that Woo and Camille encountered a handful of those "people" whom Camille had unwittingly referred to, just thirty miles earlier, as if her naming of them had made them exist. The incident, which Woo was loath to recall in detail, involved a group of four ten-year-old boys who suddenly and in

* How do the various forms of alienation—geographic, ethnic, cultural, social, and political—manifest in or overlap with the sexual? How is cultural estrangement written as sexual estrangement?

journeying home/home as journey, symbolic voyage westward (toward Western civilization/culture)

(Paradoxical?) notion of marriage as alienating, traces traditional marriage arc of woman leaving home and family for husband

Marriage signals shift in self-conception and perception—newfound social identities as "husband" and "wife"

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

symphony threw wet stones at Woo's sweated back while he was at the edge of what he thought was a desolate thicket, relieving himself. He was in midstream when the first stone struck, though his sweater cushioned the stone's impact and distracted him from seriously considering its source. Ping! Ping! The second and third struck in quick succession and then a shower of smaller stones, also wet, hit him like rain. The usual racial epithets were hurled as well and then as quickly as they had ambushed their man, the boys vanished into the thicket. Ha ha, ha, he could hear them, heh, heh, heh.

~~Woo did not let the incident disrupt him. He finished out the stream, shook and tucked himself in, button, then zipper, then belt.~~

Camille, who had watched through the car windshield, sprang up out of the car when he returned. She rushed up to him and kissed him on the cheek. It was a kiss of the same variety as the kiss in the hotel room, the sort she spontaneously doled out on rare occasions.

"Why didn't you yell at those lousy jerks?" she asked.

"This is minor incident. Too much trouble for nothing," he said, alluding to a wider spectrum of incidents she knew nothing about.

~~"Why didn't you at least tell them you aren't Japanese?"~~

~~"Why didn't you?" he asked.~~

She bit her thumbnail and looked down at his sweater, which he had taken off and folded.

"Why were you wearing that sweater? It's so hot! If I was a man, I'd take my shirt off."

"No such a thing. It is unsafe to expose oneself in an isolated location. Hot, cold, doesn't matter."

"Gosh, that's so paranoid," she said. He had looked so

uninterruption
in activity signals
habituation to/
apathy toward
racism

regular
occurrence =
desensitization

Reoccurring
preoccupation
with cultural
(in)distinction, notion
of foreign as "Other"
(nebulous, indistinct
entity)

Assumption of
responsibility in new
role as wife ⇒
possible subversion/
reconfiguration of
traditional gender roles
and marital duties
↓
Wife tasked with
protection of Chinese
husband in / from
America

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Continued in
GO HOME! ...

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the foreword, Viet Thanh Nguyen describes his search for a “home of [his] own creation,” a home founded in language and storytelling. Throughout this collection, how is the notion of “home” tied to the experience of language (speaking, reading, writing, translation, etc.)? What does it mean to find a “home in language”?
2. Consider the following quote from novelist James Salter, featured in Amitava Kumar’s “Love Poems for the Border Patrol”: “Your language is your country. . . . I’ve thought about it a great deal, and I may have it backwards—your country is your language” (p. 202). What role does language play in the construction of national identity? What does it mean for a country to have an “official” language?
3. How do notions of foreign occupation and colonialism inform the stories and poems in this collection? How did colonial biases of whiteness influence Viet Thanh Nguyen’s adolescent ideas of “culture” (p. 2) and Chang-Rae Lee’s conception of an “authentic short story” (p. 277)?
4. Describe the relationship between food, space, and place in this collection. How does food evoke a sense of “home”? Consider Kimiko Hahn’s “Things That Remind Me of Home,” Rajiv Mohabir’s “Post Trauma,” and Esmé Wei-jun Wang’s “Elegy.”
5. In “Mothers, Lock Up Your Daughters Because They Are Terrifying,” Alice Sola Kim writes: “There are so many ways to miss your mother” (p. 15). How does the figure of the mother function in this collection? Are there instances in which mothers are considered in forms other than a human guardian?
6. Many of the characters that appear in this collection occupy the liminal space between their Eastern and Western cultures. How do these multicultural characters act as a mediating force between Eastern and Western cultures—as conciliators in the “clash of civilizations” (p. 35)? Consider the intermediary role of multicultural characters in Mohja Kahf’s “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom of Sears,” Muna Gurung’s “Aama, 1978–2015,” Gina Apostol’s “The Unintended,” and Chang-Rae Lee’s “The Faintest Echo of Our Language.”

7. Many of the short stories and poems in *Go Home!* are interested in questions of genealogy, that is, biological, geographical, political, and sexual heritage. Consider Marilyn Chin's "For Mitsuye Yamada on Her 90th Birthday" and Rajiv Mohabir's "Costero," "Pygmy White Whale," and "Kalapani." How do these poems work to construct or deconstruct notions of lineage and legacy?
8. How do the various forms of alienation—geographic, ethnic, cultural, social, and political—manifest in or overlap with the sexual in this collection? Consider the following pieces:
 - a) How is cultural estrangement written as sexual estrangement in Jennifer Tseng's "The Words *Honey* and *Moon*"?
 - b) What is the relationship between "foreignness" and queerness in Rajiv Mohabir's "Costero" and Wo Chan's "what do I make of my face / except"?

THE FEMINIST PRESS

The Feminist Press is an educational nonprofit organization founded to advance women's rights and amplify feminist perspectives. We publish classic and new writing from around the world, create cutting-edge programs, and elevate silenced and marginalized voices in order to support personal transformation and social justice for all people.

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THE ASIAN AMERICAN WRITERS' WORKSHOP

Established in 1991, the Asian American Writers' Workshop is a national not-for-profit arts organization devoted to creating, publishing, developing, and disseminating creative writing by Asian Americans.

This sample educator's guide was created in collaboration with an undergraduate student currently attending Dartmouth College. The student volunteer marked up passages, wrote discussion questions, and researched terms, concepts, and related resources, imagining that this text was on their course syllabus.

