

Making America Holy

by Olympia Spivey

This essay was a meaningful refuge for me to return to throughout the tumultuous events of the semester. When we began working on exercises for it, I planned to write a piece about my work and studies in politics and human rights, but my family was hit hard by the pandemic and it knocked the wind out of my focus and motivation. I no longer had income, my parents were out of work, and all my friends had deserted the city, leaving me cooped up in an empty apartment wondering how we could survive this. It was my writing course and professor that reminded me that it was important—necessary, even—to engage with what I was experiencing, and to give voice to it. This piece is my wrestling with why it was that I needed to write, and why it is that we always must carry on writing, listening, and creating dialogue with one another. I think that now, more than ever, it is crucial that marginalized young voices continue to speak back to the society that has harmed and forsaken them so deeply, and I believe that there is wholeness, justice, and healing to be built there.

—Olympia Spivey

In his book of essays *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, Alexander Chee shares a moment from one of his writing courses in which one of his brightest students, in the wake of the 2016 United States presidential election, asks, “What is the point even of writing if this can happen?” (253). Chee’s essay, “On Becoming an American Writer,” explores the perils of carrying on with writing amid circumstances that make it seem an inadequate craft. He explains to his students, “If what you write matters enough, it makes no difference where you write it, or if you have a desk, or if you have quiet, and so on” (256). He wrote this knowing that his class of future writers would be met with various obstacles throughout their careers—obstacles which serve, in some way, to challenge the value of written work and its ability to incite tangible change.

I find myself here, now, trying to write in the midst of a deadly pandemic. Hunched over my kitchen table in a half-empty New York apartment, I spend hours working on assignments that normally take me thirty minutes, while each day the news reports more deaths added to the thousands who have already perished. My family gets their income as live musicians and performers. Now, as all work has been moved online, that income is much more uncertain. Chee’s words echo through my mind as I search for the motivation to finish my last several papers of the spring semester. I wonder how writing can continue to matter to me when, in a few weeks, I will place myself on the front lines of essential work, and in doing so, expose

myself to a pathogen that has killed a quarter of a million people worldwide in the last five months.

Chee, throughout his book, produces a possible answer to his student, as well as to all aspiring writers on how “to stand up and leave that room in your mind so you can go and write—and live” (“American Writer” 257). His conception of what that “room” can be like resonates with our contemporary crisis. Chee recounts the difficulties he and others had while trying to write after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, or after the deaths of his friends and loved ones during the height of the AIDS epidemic. He notes that writers can, in the midst of dread, become “frozen by writing for that audience, by writing for the missing. . . . Waiting to see if we were worthy of being alive when they were dead” (“American Writer” 262). This same waiting cripples me as I attempt to detail my lived experience alongside the climbing death tolls of COVID-19, grappling with how my stories could ever measure up to the gravitas of the larger situation. Even with Chee’s advice of making room, I question the value of a young, healthy student’s written account of a pandemic, and I wonder how any of it could hold real power.

Chee addresses this question of what type of writing holds power in “Annie Dillard and the Writing Life.” As an undergraduate student, he learns from his professor, Annie Dillard, to value the individual writer’s own unique sensibility. Addressing a common student concern that everything they could write has already been written about, Dillard retorts: “Yes, everything’s been written, but also, the thing you want to write, before you wrote it, was impossible to write. Otherwise it would already exist. You writing it makes it possible.” The lesson suggests that power can be drawn from individual written accounts because they create the means by which we might begin to connect the self with all that it touches. Each of these connection points is a place that is particular to each individual. And from there, we might find not only newness, but also the things that we value, in ways that they are often not deemed important. It follows that our stories can matter only once we believe that they deserve to do so. The modern writer is constantly charged with the work of writing stories about themselves and their experiences, in the hope of shaping a more equitable world which knows, and believes in, the value of the writer.

The pandemic is emptying the skeletons that we have long left in the closet, revealing some of the social and systemic failures that many of us have often ignored. I watch as we all drown in confusion, not knowing how to define what this time can mean to us. We begin to decide which workers are essential and which are not. Some people have been sent home to safety and hefty, comfortable bank accounts, while some of the most vulnerable and underpaid employees continue to show up to their jobs, without hazard pay. The current American leadership feeds on its ability to perpetuate misinformation, deliberately working to bury and discredit the voice of anybody who might stand to challenge the status quo. It is clear to me that we are moving toward an unsustainable future—and that we must reevaluate almost everything.

The New York Times Editorial Board’s opinion piece, “The America We Need” enumerates the many ways in which America was already failing long before the pandemic swept over us. The article discusses the drastic contrast in the American experience of the coronavirus across socioeconomic gaps, gaps that have continued to widen over decades, such that millionaires have

empty properties around the country while millions of families cannot pay rent. But what stands out to me is the board's emphasis that "The fragility of our society and government is the product of deliberate decisions." These deliberate decisions have been constructed over centuries, and determined exactly what, or who, will and will not have value. These incremental steps, shifting language, and policy decisions have continuously dehumanized people of color, working class people, undocumented immigrants, and other marginalized communities. It is within this larger story that we have built the America I see now, where insults are hurled at me on the street because my ambiguously biracial, slanted eyes associate me with a so-called "Chinese" virus, where black and brown bodies are policed off the streets of my neighborhood while dozens of white people are left to sunbathe in the park.

Amid that story, we have had to advocate for our own experiences, our own narratives. Throughout my life as a marginalized person, I have found ways and places to belong and to breathe, and I miss those spaces now that we have all been separated. Thinking of that safety and warmth, I turn to Sable Elyse Smith's essay "Ecstatic Resilience." We are transported to a dance floor, sweating, writhing, moving alongside other bodies. Smith writes of the nightclub as a sanctuary that liberates queer bodies, clarifying that dancing "is not an escape. It is a punctuation. It is about claiming an instant of time and something that can be mine completely" (4). The melodic flow of Smith's prose allows for the essay to develop a rhythm all its own, and from there I can feel the pulse of connection, and of freedom. It is the same pulse that I chase, and the pulse that we struggle to find when our modes of connection have suddenly vanished. And while that rhythm is something that we feel individually, there is a different power born from sharing it alongside others that is missing when we are alone. Smith moves into this realization, writing that it is "A silent affirmation. We are taking up space at the same time. . . . This is the dance" (5). Such an affirmation, that we can "tak[e] up space," together, gives us validating elation—we are not crazy, bizarre, or wrong in being what we are. Not being able to be together in person has stripped us of this ability to find ourselves in other people, to affirm that we are not the only ones out there.

Chee embarked on this journey of affirmation as well, and his navigation of his own queer biracial identity seems to suggest similar values surrounding community. His essay "Girl" follows his exploration of his gender expression as he experiments with makeup, wigs, and fashion for the first time. These tools enable him to construct a new, equally affirming self over the one that exists: "somehow I have always known how to put this face together." Applying lipstick and wearing long wigs allow Chee to experience passing for a white girl, and this bears vastly different consequences from his identity as a gay, mixed Asian man. Chee explains that he needed these "mask[s]," as they pushed him toward doing the vital "work" of "being at home in this face, just as it is when I wake up" ("Girl"). In doing this "work," Chee comes to a conclusion central to much of the rest of his writing: that the conception of the self, which rises out of the conscious recognition of a socially given self and then the deliberate reconstruction of a new one, is the vital foundation of the modern writer's practice.

It seems that understanding oneself is the grounding first step to connecting with other people, or with other parts of the world. Like Chee, I believe that we all reach a time when we are confronted with our own faces, and we have to figure out some way to find home from inside

these faces. However, much of this work involves being able to see others like us, reflected back to us, showing us that we belong. With the progression of the virus, this has been made more challenging by those who want to frame our narratives for us. This past week, I watched videos of the president at a press conference snap at Asian American journalist Weijia Jiang, telling her to “ask China” about her question (CBS News 00:00:24-00:00:25). Just two months earlier, Jiang tweeted that a White House official had, in her presence, referred to the virus as the “Kung-Flu” (@weijia). Such racist comments are not new to me or to other Asian Americans.

Attempts to turn the pandemic into a cultural divide, scapegoating an ethnic group for the suffering caused by a pathogen, continue to reveal what the current administration intentionally chooses to value and devalue. It suggests a profound fear, on behalf of White House officials, that they will be blamed for the policies and political narrative they continue to support, which have failed and continue to fail millions of Americans through lack of adequate healthcare, compensation, and infrastructure. They are afraid that enough people will understand that their choices are designed to maintain the narrative of blame—and to keep others oppressed. So long as we remain in their boxes, which cast my face as unwelcome or diseased, this racist scapegoating will remain unquestioned by a large portion of the population. The president’s attack on Jiang reveals a lack of, or unwillingness to hear, accurate stories to help combat racism. The solution as suggested by Chee’s reconfiguration of his face is to push stories that have within them poignant understandings of the self into existence. The presence of such stories will continue to challenge arbitrary valuation systems currently in place.

But even where writing might provide us space to be freer than our boxed realities, I wonder how I can begin to write an account that is as important as this feels. Matters of life and death are dropped into my lap for me to shape into something coherent. I remember that Chee has advice for this, and that part of writing himself out of those predicaments was to stop trying to measure up, or to imagine writing for those people who couldn’t write themselves. But the current political climate, which continues to scrutinize reporters and bash media sources, seems to make it nearly impossible to be heard, or to be taken seriously. If even professional journalists cannot land their writing, what makes me think mine can hold weight in a time of constant streams of content production, and a time of life and death?

Perhaps what I am seeking is to be able to name what makes my place in this special. I think back to reading Marina Keegan’s posthumous book *The Opposite of Loneliness*, and of how her youth did not prevent her from being heard, instead, amplifying her further. Keegan, a brilliant and promising young writer, died in 2012, just five days after her graduation from Yale. In her essay “Song for the Special,” Keegan writes, “Every generation thinks it’s special—my grandparents because they remember World War II, my parents because of discos and the moon.” She playfully suggests that we will have the Internet as our marker (“Song for the Special”), but with our current pace, I wonder if it might be more than that. A deadly pandemic seems a notable reference point for our time, too.

Keegan mentions that she feels intense jealousy for everyone that she sees accomplish something, or make something valuable, or who can have their written work heard from the dead—eerily ironic for a writer whose book was published after her premature death. But she

considers that what might save us from such jealousies is the possibility that either none of us is special, or that all of us are (“Song for the Special”). Maybe what matters is connection—when we are able to dance near to each other, “punctuated by an 808,” as Smith describes—that affirmation that we are here, too.

I’m not yet sure what we will claim for our future, though if we are deliberately rebellious and empathetic enough, I have hope that it will be more than a death toll. It is extraordinary to be sitting in my shoebox apartment alone for two months, but to continue my education online and not to have skipped a beat with my loved ones. I reject the idea that quarantine will make us prisoners to a narrow way of experiencing our lives, or that no change can come from a period that may feel stagnant at times.

Keegan wrote to her classmates, in her final installment for the *Yale Daily News*, “I’m scared of losing this web we’re in. This elusive, indefinable, opposite of loneliness” (“The Opposite of Loneliness”). I think of all the time that I have spent through my life finding ways to write my own name, finding home in my own body, and then meeting others that could see, hear, and connect with that self. Keegan confronts her own fear, and says that we do not have to lose this feeling we have worked to build. I believe that we are still finding ways to hold onto each other, even now. And I believe that we can write new spaces for ourselves, learning from what has been made visible in our stillness.

I think of the nightclubs and the lipstick and the classrooms for writing, the essays I make, and it inspires me to know that we have always been doing this, somehow. I might think my generation special for having lived through something as horrific as this, or even for being able to message each other instantly, but those before us have experienced their own horrors. They made choices, consciously, about what they would value, and they wrote their realities to reflect it. The America that we need is one made up of the many different homes, all added together, rather than one top-down vision. I believe that it can be true that my family is enduring struggles, while it is also true that others have lost their families, while others have been untouched. It will be our ability to synthesize those realities, to make room for the value of many, that will determine America’s future.

One thing I am sure of is that I do not want to be remembered for having witnessed a pandemic and emerging much the same. There is not yet room in the narrative for so many of us—essential workers, marginalized groups, even writers—and there is no incentive for those in power to try to make space for our stories. We have been charged by those before us to respond to what we are facing, and the people that read us later will do the same. They are watching, relying on us, on me.

Chee acknowledges that it will always be a strange time to teach one another to write our stories, but that we will always be better for having done so, for having seized the opportunity to reveal truths. Writing for his deceased loved ones, Chee says that “I live and work and I feel them watching me. And so I leave this here now, for them. And for you” (277). And as Chee leaves his words for us, I think that we must keep holding on. We can leave our words here for each

other, and, at the same time, see ourselves in each other. We can speak to the things that are sacred to us, and make our imagined futures holy when we write them into being. I hope to leave things that are special, and I think that we all can.

I have not been able to dance with my friends for over two months, and I cannot be sure when this will end, how many of us will be left, or what will be left of us when we emerge. I miss the way that the city moves, rife with laughter, under bright lights on the weekends. It feels most alive to me when I remember to write about it, when I remember that we have made it special, that we can make tomorrow more promising. I grieve for the times and the people that we lost, for what we would have been doing, and for the America that has not been here for us, but that could be. Yet how extraordinary it is—here we are, still writing, hearing each other, affirming ourselves. And here you are, reading this, listening.

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