

The ghosts of history

Recalling the Chinese Exclusion Act of the 1800s, novelist Shawna Yang Ryan sees parallels in our current immigration debate

BY ROBERT ALFORD
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Arizona's controversial SB 1070 is the latest example in a long history of exclusionary immigration policy in the United States. The Arizona law attempted to permit police the right to detain anybody suspected of being in the country without authorization as well as making it a crime for immigrants not to carry legal residency documentation at all times. Those two parts of the law were blocked by a federal judge on July 28.

The law's opponents claim that it is a gross violation of civil liberties, which will lead to racial profiling against the state's Latino population, while its supporters claim that it is a necessary tool in stopping the rise of illegal immigration within the border state. The law is predicated upon the assumption that certain immigrant populations pose a threat to both the economy and the national identity within the United States.

These kinds of nativist sentiments have their direct historical antecedent in the Chinese Exclusion Laws of the 1800s, which effectively banned the immigration of all people of Chinese descent, and the Immigration Act of 1924, which established a quota system that favored Northern and Western European immigrants over Southern and Eastern Europeans and Asians.

The recently re-published novel, "Water Ghosts," by author Shawna Yang Ryan, is set in the Chinese immigrant farming community of Locke, Calif., in 1928, during the aftermath of these repressive acts of legislation. One of the effects of these laws was to prevent Chinese women from joining their husbands who had previously emigrated to the United States. Denying married couples the ability to be together turned towns like Locke into communities of bachelors, populated almost entirely by men, with the exception of the white prostitutes who operated the town brothel. Ryan's novel begins when three mysterious Chinese women arrive in Locke one day on a boat, floating through the mists of the Sacramento River. When one of these women turns out to be the wife of Richard Fong, the proprietor of the town's gambling parlor, the mystery deepens, and the people of the town begin to suspect that these women may possess powers beyond the realm of understanding.

Ryan's novel combines elements of myth and fantasy with historical realism in a style that is dreamlike and yet firmly grounded in the substance of history. Her characters are vividly drawn, and their stories provide the reader with insight into a period of our nation's history that often goes untold. Originally published as "Locke, 1928" by the small press El Leon Literary Arts, the book was a finalist for the Northern California Book Award and was recently re-released as "Water Ghosts" by Penguin Books. In this interview, Ryan discussed the balance of historical and aesthetic elements within her novel, and the power of fiction in enriching our understanding of history.

Robert Alford: I'd like to begin by talking about the town of Locke, Calif. What inspired



PHOTO BY ANDREA YOUNG

you to write about the history of this particular community?

Shawna Yang Ryan: Well, Locke is a very interesting and unique place and I grew up in Sacramento, which is not that far away, so I'd visited Locke and had some memory of it. Then later when I got older and read up about it, I found out that not only was this community built by the Chinese and intended to be an all Chinese community, but that also, because they were working against the immigration laws of the time, it was a bachelor community, but they were trying very hard to establish it as a family community. And then they also had these brothels there which they wouldn't allow Chinese women to work in, so they had white women working in them, which was also very unusual considering the anti-miscegenation laws of the time and the racial dynamics. So there were a lot of things going on in the town that make it a really interesting place to start talking about the Chinese immigrant experience in the early 20th century.

R.A.: What was your research process like in preparing to write your novel?

S.Y.R.: Well, I started with the library. I started with some book research to get a foundation, and I was also reading novels written in that time period to get a feel for the pop culture and the language and the style. And then I went and lived in Locke for a month so I could really get a sensory feeling for the place.

R.A.: Locke is described in your novel as "a man's town" and yet many of the central characters in your story are women. Can you describe the role of women within these early 20th century immigrant farming communities?

S.Y.R.: For the Chinese particularly, a lot of their communities were bachelor communities because there were laws that prevented women from immigrating. And so I wanted to write a story about these Chinese women who were left behind and uniquely effected by this situation. That's why, even though it's a man's town, and the communities at the time were mostly male,



A SKELETON IN HIS CLOSET.

Editorial cartoon "A Skeleton in His Closet" by L.M. Glackens, published in "Puck" magazine, Jan. 3, 1912. Uncle Sam holds a paper, "Protest against Russian exclusion of Jewish Americans" and looks with shock upon a Chinese skeleton labeled "American exclusion of Chinese" in his closet.

I do have a lot of female characters.

R.A.: The history that we learn in school and in our popular culture tends to be dominated by the stories of white, heterosexual men. Do you think that historical fiction can provide the opportunity to consider history from a wider variety of perspectives?

S.Y.R.: Definitely. I think that what you said is true, that when we tend to get a certain kind of history, fiction is a great way to fill in those gaps and widen our view. I mean, hopefully we can do that in our history books as well, but I think when we come up with these individual stories and novels that writers of historical fiction feel compelled to write, from that we can start building this more quilted view of history.

R.A.: The Chinese Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act of 1924 were some of the most blatant examples of racially prejudiced immigration policy in our nation's history. Do you see any parallels between the experience of early Chinese migrant workers and the current immigration debate in our country?

S.Y.R.: Unfortunately yes. I think that a lot of immigrant groups have gone through this cycle of coming in, people feeling threatened by them, laws being passed, prejudice against them, and often times in school, we learn about it as something in [the] past, right? I mean, America is supposed to be a place of freedom, but unfortunately if we step outside of the moment and look at what's happening in our current time, it's the same story. So there are definitely parallels and especially with the kinds of laws as well. There was a law requiring the Chinese to carry their papers at all times with the penalty of imprisonment, so that sounds somewhat similar to the Arizona laws, and this whole talk about anchor babies is also similar to the argument made against allowing the Chinese to become naturalized citizens and against allowing the men to bring their wives over.

R.A.: Your novel provides both a source of historical information, as well as an entertaining and compelling story. How do you balance the educational and aesthetic elements of your work?

S.Y.R.: I think I started with the idea of wanting to tell this important historical story, but then I had to anchor it to characters and getting involved in their experience and in their stories makes the educational aspects a little less didactic. So the historical context is there and you just let these characters move through it and I think that keeps the educational aspects from being a little too heavy handed.

R.A.: Your novel combines conventions of literary realism with those of myth and fantasy. Is there a relationship between these stylistic choices and the historical content of your novel?

S.Y.R.: When I started the novel, I think I did want to make it somewhat magical realism, but I didn't want it to be too fantastical, so I tried to ground it in some very realistic century detail. And I think that's why there is just that feeling to it, like some people have commented, where you feel the texture of the dirt and you feel the heat and it keeps you very grounded so that it doesn't fly off and become too much like a fairy tale. And as far as the connection to history, I think that in looking back on some of these things from the past, history does seem a little bit surreal.

R.A.: Were there any specific writers or traditions of storytelling that you found particularly inspiring while you were working on your novel?

S.Y.R.: Toni Morrison's "Beloved," I think, had a pretty strong influence on the book, and some people have commented on that and it's very true. I'm thinking of how she uses ghosts to represent these regrets or traumas of history, and I'm also interested in doing that and that leads us back toward the form of magical realism. And I think I was reading a lot of Virginia Woolf too, and was influenced by her stream of consciousness way of writing. You know, the character Chloe is actually named after Toni Morrison [Chloe Wofford is Toni Morrison's birth name] and her middle name's Virginia, so I put that little homage to them in there.

Originally published by Real Change News, Seattle, Wash. © www.streetnewsservice.org