

# The Asian Reporter

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## MY TURN

■ Marie Lo



# Rethinking the “home” in “homesteading”

I have lived in Portland for more than 11 years, but it was only during the past year, when my husband, daughter, and I lived temporarily in San Antonio, Texas, that I realized how “Portland-y” I’ve become. We lived in a part of San Antonio called the Pearl. We frequented the farmers market and ate at the two vegetarian restaurants in the city. I sat by our apartment pool in 100+ degree weather knitting a cowl. Our Subaru Outback stuck out like a flannel shirt at a debutante ball. One could tell from a mile away that we weren’t from around those parts.

Now that we’re back in Portland with its gray drizzling days, I feel right at home. There are vegetarian and vegan options everywhere we go. I can knit and spin yarn without feeling awkward and self-conscious. Portland is a crafty hub of sustainability, where “being green” is a badge of pride and not a state of envy.

Back to Portland also means back to the world of urban homesteads, where gardens, composting, and backyard chickens live in perfect eco-harmony. We gather around the television to watch reruns of “Little House on the Prairie,” a cultural model of the romance of homesteading if there ever was one. It is one of my husband’s favorite shows. He is, of course, an Oregonian — born and raised — and he grew up on a farm where it wasn’t unusual to snuggle up with baby goats on the couch. This little family idyll, however, is interrupted by our six-year-old who asks, “Why aren’t there any Asian people on the show?”

My husband and I look at each other, wondering where to begin. Do we go with the historical answer? And what would be the historical answer? That there were hardly any Asians on American television shows in the late 1970s? Or, would the historical answer be that this show was based on books by Laura Ingalls Wilder and reflected the general absence of Asians in early 20th-century literature? Or, do we talk about how these omissions are the result of laws that not only prevented Asian settlement and encouraged Europeans homesteaders, but that also took this land away from Native Americans?

We went with an answer about immigration, explaining how early Asian immigrants were mainly men who worked on the railroads and that

during this period, there weren’t many Asians in Minnesota. I couldn’t help but wonder if we neglected to point out the obvious — that if she were to watch television shows from the past few decades, there would be just as few Asians on television as there were on the prairies in the late 19th century. For example, shows like “Sex and the City” and the more recent program “Girls” are set in New York City, home to more than one million Asian Americans, according to the 2010 census. Yet, Asian-American characters on these shows are about as prominent as “Wing,” the Chinese railroad worker played by legendary Japanese-American actor James Shigeta, who only appeared in one episode during season three of “Little House.”

Her question also pointed out a gap in contemporary homesteading narratives, especially ones that are popular in Portland. Where are Asian Americans? What are the factors and reasons behind our relative lack of visibility? Have we been mainly focused on exploring issues of immigration and assimilation at the expense of other issues? To what extent do Asian-American experiences not align with this particular narrative as it is based on Euro-American homesteading experiences and enabled by the racist and colonizing 1862 Home stead Act?

The concepts of home and belonging have long been central to Asian-American cultural expressions. Should the word “home” in “homesteading” also be examined from Asian-American perspectives as well?

There are a few Asian-American writers — including David Mas Masumoto and Ruth Ozeki — who have explored some aspects of urban homesteading narratives such as organic farming, genetically modified plants, and the meat industry. And there is Bich Minh Nguyen’s 2014 book, *Pioneer Girl*, which is based on the original title of Wilder’s autobiography. As Nguyen’s literary mystery shows, there is room for examining the intersections of homesteading and immigration. This, I hope, will also be a vital site of Asian-American cultural critique. And until more Asian Americans engage, complicate, and expand the current discourse of homesteading, the answer to the question “why aren’t there any Asians?” will continue to be based on simple references to the historical past.

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## Wondering what events are going on this week?

Check out The Asian Reporter’s Community and A.C.E. Calendar sections, on pages 10 and 12.