

THE POET'S CORNER

Speak Up With Poetry



Janet Wong

YOUR STUDENTS HAVE probably heard about the dramatic rise in anti-Asian hate incidents in the United States ever since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. They may even have seen some of these incidents in the media or experienced them in person. Americans who are obsessed with the Chinese origins of the coronavirus are blaming Asians in the United States for COVID-19—even Asian Americans who have never been to Asia. These attacks are rooted in the belief that Asians will never belong in the United States, that we are foreign and should “go back” to where we came from.

Most of the incidents that have caught the nation’s attention are violent physical attacks where witnesses were present—and sometimes stood by, doing nothing. An NPR piece from April 2021 describes the efforts that thousands of people have made to step up and do something by enrolling in “bystander training” sessions that emphasize a “5D” approach: Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, and Direct (Hsu, 2021). The natural follow-up to this, in the classroom, would obviously be a sixth D: Discuss. Talk about racism so we’ll know what to do if we find ourselves facing or witnessing racist attacks in the future.

But anti-Asian racism usually does not involve violence; more often it is experienced in the form of microaggressions, defined by Derald Wing Sue and colleagues (2007) as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages...and are so pervasive and automatic in daily interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocuous” (p. 72).

When someone meets an Asian American and asks, “Where are you (really) from?”—or, even worse, “What are you?”—they are telling you that you cannot possibly be American. I would guess that at least one hundred people have asked me these questions during my lifetime.

In 1994 my first book, *Good Luck Gold and Other Poems*, was published by Margaret K. McElderry Books, then part of Macmillan (and now an imprint of Simon & Schuster). A dozen of the 42 poems in that book are about race, racism, and identity, including the poem “Speak Up”:

Speak Up
by Janet Wong

You’re Korean, aren’t you?

Yes.

Why don’t you speak
Korean?

Just don’t, I guess.

Say something Korean.

I don’t speak it.
I can’t.

C'mon. Say something.

Halmoni. *Grandmother.*

Haraboji. *Grandfather.*

Imo. *Aunt.*

Say some other stuff.

Sounds funny.

Sounds strange.

*Hey, let's listen to you
for a change.*

Listen to me?

Say some foreign words.

But I'm American,
can't you see?

*Your family came from
somewhere else.
Sometime.*

But I was born here.

So was I.

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Good Luck Gold & MORE

Good Luck Gold & MORE, the recently updated version of the original book, contains 50 new pages of text, including a prose piece expanding the meaning of each poem and a short writing prompt. Here is the new text that accompanies "Speak Up":

My father came to the United States from China when he was 12 years old. My parents met when my father was a soldier with the U.S. Army in Korea. After they married, they lived in Los Angeles, where I was born. My father didn't speak much Korean and my mother didn't speak any Chinese. We spoke to each other in English.

By the time I was five years old, some kids—at my school, in the park, and even when we were shopping in the supermarket—had made fun of me for being Asian. It didn't happen all the time, but it hurt. They would make "Chinese-sounding" noises and pull at their eyes. They would tell me to say some words in Korean or Chinese, and then they would mock those words. No one ever asked my white friends to speak German or Italian or French.

In this poem I sound like I'm saying that I don't want to speak Korean, but the opposite is the truth. I wish I spoke Korean, my mother's native language. I wish I spoke Chinese, my father's native language. I wish all of that—now. But when I was a child, I thought that learning Chinese or Korean would give the bullies more to tease me about. So I decided that I wouldn't learn those languages. I let bullies steal my family languages from me.

What are the languages of your heritage? Would you like to learn them—or any other languages?

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Immigration and Caste

An immediate and unfortunate response to hate that many Asian Americans have chosen is to distance ourselves from Asia in a way that treats Asian immigrants as "other." As I myself did in my poem "Speak Up," many American-born Asians will defend themselves from overt racism or micro-aggressions with the retort that we were born here. There is a legitimate basis for doing this: Many of us who were born here and raised as Americans do not accept the most limiting and oppressive of traditional Asian beliefs and practices. We are more likely to speak up, to demand fair treatment, and to reject conventions.

Unintentionally, though, this act of distancing ourselves plays into notions of caste by marking immigrants as inferior. In *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson (2020) discusses how "those straddling the middle [rungs of society] may succumb to the greatest angst and uncertainty as they aspire to a higher rung...[and] depend on the reassurance that, while they may have troubles in their lives, at least

they are not at the bottom” (p. 269). In this way, saying “I was born here” is microaggressive behavior that Asian Americans commit against Asian immigrants. I explore this in my poem “Immigrant Boy”:

Immigrant Boy
by Janet Wong

He and I are not the same,
though we look alike to you.
He was born here. I am new.
Just three months ago I came.

I followed him around today.
He does not like me to be near.
I wonder—had I been born here,
would he want me to play?

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In this poem, I pretend to be an immigrant boy who is feeling rejected by a native-born child. I don't mention race or ethnicity; this could be any immigrant child, from anywhere, wanting to interact with a native-born child in any country. Here is the new explanatory prose piece and writing prompt in *Good Luck Gold & MORE*:

When I was in college at UCLA, I took French classes every year. I even lived in France for one year, my junior year. When I was a senior, a new student joined our Advanced French class a few weeks late. Everyone was already seated when she walked into the classroom. Our teacher looked around, pointed to me, and told her, “Sit near Janet. She will help you.”

The girl had grown up in Vietnam and had attended a French school there as a child. She knew more French than any of us. I wondered why I had been picked to help her. It's possible that I was chosen because I was very good at French. But looking around, suddenly I became aware that I was the only Asian in the class—except for this girl. It seemed to me that I had been chosen to help

her simply because I was Asian. But I was nothing like this girl. She was wearing frilly clothes; I was dressed in simple clothes. She had long, curled hair and lots of make-up; I had short hair and a plain face. It made me mad that we had been lumped together. So I gave her no help at all. I can still remember how sad she looked after she saw that I did not want to be her friend.

When I wrote this poem, I remembered how poorly I had treated her and I felt guilty. I decided to reverse the identities, and to write this poem while imagining how she might've felt.

Have you ever been very unfriendly to someone, treating them poorly—even though they did nothing wrong? Why did you act that way? How do you think they felt?

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Addressing Microaggressions

While it can be hard to monitor microaggressions, the classroom is the perfect place to address them—and poems like “Speak Up” and “Immigrant Boy” give us that opportunity. Val Brown (2021), principal academic officer of CARE (the Center for Antiracist Education), has explained that microaggressions “cause lasting damage and make classrooms and schools unsafe for marginalized students and educators.” It's an issue of trust—or the destruction of it. In describing a microaggression by another student toward her daughter, Brown (2021) said: “We never followed up with the teacher because my daughter did not trust that the teacher would take her concerns seriously or recognize the comment was racist. My daughter believed she had all the information she needed when her teacher remained silent.”

A factor that complicates microaggressions is that they often are intended as compliments; someone from the dominant caste is attempting to show an interest in cultural diversity and unintentionally stumbles into offensive territory. One way to address this issue and to promote anti-racist behavior in our schools is to be ready to acknowledge our mistakes immediately when we become aware of them. To prepare students to act appropriately when needed, we can

share this poem of apology on a regular basis, “Scary Territory” from *GREAT Morning! Poems for School Leaders to Read Aloud*:

Scary Territory
by Janet Wong

It can be scary
saying sorry—
will or won't they
believe your story?
And, of course,
you're going to worry
if saying sorry works.

Saying sorry
takes some courage.
Saying sorry
takes some guts.
It definitely isn't fun
to sit down and discuss
how you should've
acted,
what you could've
said—
but
this very scary territory
is mainly in your head!

Poem copyright © 2018 by Janet S. Wong from *GREAT Morning! Poems for School Leaders to Read Aloud* by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong (Pomelo Books).

Putting anti-racist principles into practice is not easy; challenging conversations will certainly become the norm before we achieve equity in our schools. Let's do what we can to speak up and to prepare ourselves as bystanders—and let's examine, question, and forgive ourselves as we all learn together. •

Janet Wong is the author of more than 30 books for children and the co-creator (with Sylvia Vardell) of *The Poetry Friday Anthology* series and *Poetry Friday Power Book* series. Her most recent book is *Good Luck Gold & MORE*.
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