

Staying In

Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American A-sociality

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When one thinks of staying in, a rather quotidian scenario comes to mind. Often, at the beginning of a weekend night, one is found asking the question, “Should I stay in or go out?” And sometimes one decides that it might be better to stay in. I pose this question and answer to consider how the seemingly passive, antisocial act of staying in can shift and reconstellate one’s relations to others, to the socialities with which one is entangled, but from the momentary position of being alone, as *asocial*.

In the music video for the song “Your Best American Girl” (2016), Mitski Miyawaki inhabits the solitude of staying in, in a particular way. Mitski addresses a white “all-American boy,” who looks at her and flirtatiously smiles, winks, and waves. In turn, she shyly responds with a smile and a wave of her own. However, this exchange is interrupted when a white presumably all-American girl comes into view, territorially draping her arms around him. The boy turns and brings the girl’s chin in for a kiss, while Mitski, with a fading smile, turns to her hand frozen in midwave and brings in her chin to kiss her own upheld hand. As the white couple nibble, lick, and kiss each other’s bodies, Mitski nibbles at her wrist, licks her palm, kisses her fingers, grabs and holds her own body close. The couple play with each other, and Mitski plays alone, with her hands and her guitar. In the chorus, Mitski admits, “You’re an all-American boy / I guess I couldn’t help but try to be your best American girl,” to a boy too wrapped up in his best American girl, who, as the video makes clear, is white, and not her.

Mitski’s tender yet lustful gestures enacted upon herself lean toward the choreographic, as her arms reach out and curve into the spaces above and around her, bringing her closer to herself, enclosing herself, turning

inward and staying in. Her movements give form to her performance as a singer-songwriter in a music genre defined as solo, as the solitary artist onstage with self-disclosures of perceived authentic emotional transparency. Yet in the video Mitski expands and complicates this genre and the aesthetic, political stakes of solo performance. She entangles its solitary aspects with her experiences as an Asian American woman in the indie singer-songwriter music scene, wherein the relatable confessional voices of white, masculinized, raw, misunderstood genius or white, feminized, vulnerable, angry artistry are more prominent than that of a supposedly timid or unfeeling, “inscrutable” Asian American woman.¹

For Mitski, to be an Asian American woman is to then not be the best or all that American, and to be a singer-songwriter racialized and gendered as such is to inhabit solo performance differently, to confound what a singer-songwriter promises to reveal in her singularity shared. To be an Asian American woman is to have and cultivate a certain relation to one’s aloneness, and as seen in the video, it is also to be ill-fitted to certain narrative fantasies of meaningful and intimate forms of relationality tethered to the form of the white, heterosexual couple. Mitski at her best is alone, but in such a way that enacts the ambivalent and rich aspects of solitude, of being alone with oneself, that do not suggest a lack as much as the plenitude of time and space needed for one’s protection, comfort, and love that make up the contemporary Asian American aesthetic practice of what I call *staying in*.

For poet and writer Ocean Vuong, staying in similarly involves a relation to one’s own hand and playing alone. In his poem “Ode to Masturbation” (2016), masturbation is its own kind of solo act or performance of the self, done to one’s own body. Yet in an introduction to a reading given in 2016, Vuong explains that this ode is also for the bodies of others. He explains, “I often think of other bodies and what it means for other bodies to empower themselves, and sometimes the only control that we have is the control and the power of self-pleasure and self-joy, which is inexhaustible. And is free.”² As he speaks, he also smiles and pauses, as his audience laughs, cheers, snaps, and hoots to support him and relate to that “inexhaustible” and “free” desire for oneself and others.

In Vuong’s ode, what is perceived as the private act of masturbation is given a public life. Through his reading, a mode of relating emerges from the topic at hand, as well as through the slippage between “other bodies” that are not his own and the “we” of Other minoritarian bodies, including his own as a queer Vietnamese American refugee. These Other bodies that are his and others’ guide his hand, bringing him closer to himself, as well as to those to whom he reads and writes, “and sometimes / your hand / is all you have / to hold / yourself to this / world.”³ The world Vuong shapes for himself is populated by the desirous bodies of others

that are the stuff of sexual fantasies and dreams made of past and possible lovers, but also the burdens of loss and historical trauma made of memories of loved ones felt as “part of the softest hurt’s / unhealable.”⁴ To hold himself, pleasurably, is to hold himself up to the world.

The poem’s short lines mark Vuong’s breathless yet “inexhaustible” deftness and lyrical sleight of hand that brings in those he remembers, who might otherwise recede from memory, for “how often these lines / resemble claw marks / of your brothers / being dragged / away from you,”⁵ who must be found “in american dirt / in towns and names / like hope / celebration / success & sweet.”⁶ In his ode, staying in becomes a means of clearing out, of making oneself porous, receptive, and open, “to be this / luminous / to be so bright so / empty / the bullets pass / right through you / thinking / they have found / the sky.”⁷ Other bodies and his own as the queer, displaced, and Asian bear the marks of violent histories. Yet these bodies evade narratives reducible to either injury or resilience through the pleasures felt from within, from staying in one’s body that enables one to then share it out again to and for “other bodies.”

For Mitski and Vuong, staying in takes multiple asocial, unaccommodating forms. Staying in can be the act of staying home, either to spend time alone, to wait for someone to come over, or to daydream and fantasize about someone, about “other bodies,” as Vuong does. Or, it can also be the affective act of distancing, of turning inward and appearing otherwise standoffish or cold in front of others, whether those others are friends or a possible lover, which Mitski shows us in “Your Best American Girl,” as well as in her social media presence and articulations of going to shows alone.

This essay moves forth from the arc of Mitski’s and Vuong’s hands and their gestures of retreat and reveal, the simultaneity of which constitutes Asian American asociality and the act of staying in. I consider how the racial performativity of Asian American asociality, shaped through the act of staying in, rearranges what constitutes the social and, in so doing, critiques the compulsory sociability and relatibility demanded of minoritarian subjects to go out, come out, and be out. In the contemporary moment, minoritarian subjects bear the burden of representation, of representing and standing in for the totality of the community to which they belong.⁸ At the same time, minoritarian subjects must also bear and navigate the burden of relatibility from which a compulsory sociability emerges; one must not only be legible and transparent but also accessibly and accommodately so.⁹ A critique of the burden of relatibility and compulsory sociability can be sensed and grasped through Asian American asociality, a mode of racial performativity that navigates the processes by which Asian Americans have been racially figured as a problem for and of sociality, as assimilated yet socially isolated, unrelatable subjects. In

what follows, I touch on Mitski's and Vuong's enactments of staying in, which, whether at a live performance, at a reading, in a music video, on social media, or in a poem, render it the solitary act of finding relief, pleasure, and comfort alone. The provisional moments of solitude, rest, and protection that staying in can offer critique the exhausting liberal mandate impressed upon the minoritarian subject to make oneself relatable, sociable, and approachable. Mitski and Vuong linger in a critical position from which to express and articulate a fraught relation to preexisting, recognizable forms of sociality and relationality. At the same time, staying in redraws the boundaries of what constitutes the social and relationality as such and enacts other desirous and desiring ways of turning toward oneself in order to be inclined differently toward others.¹⁰

Relatability and Compulsory Sociability

Scholarship in university studies has critiqued how institutionalized structures of state, capital, and academy incorporate minoritarian difference in service of their own images of diversity.¹¹ Likewise, Asian Americanist scholarship has addressed the ways Asian Americans are racialized as the self-sufficient model minority, whose difference is deemed acceptable or valorized insofar as it enables state-sanctioned antiblack racism and the absence of structural support and services for specifically black and brown, non-East Asian communities. Both are wary of the instrumentalization of representable minoritarian difference within liberal multiculturalist discourse.

In grappling with this, scholars have turned toward the histories of insurgent, radical social movements and forms of coalition building, such as the student protests on college campuses in the sixties, as past unfinished models of action. An attachment to social life and the radical potentialities it is perceived to hold emerges from this, as a political desire and hope that minority knowledges and world-making practices always come from the realm of the social, as that which slips beyond institutionalization's grasp and the administrative, absorptive, managerial workings of power. What follows is the imperative to be social, to put oneself out there in ways that are sociable for the purposes of working no longer for the institution but against it. One's political investments and acts of solidarity must be located in the realm of the social, as a means of withstanding the liberal multiculturalist tactics and privatization of institutions.

For Kadji Amin, queer studies' redemptive impulse idealizes denigrated, pathologized cultural objects as transgressive and locates these objects within the social. Staying in, then, might be seen as an obstruction or foreclosure of the possibilities of queer, utopian spaces and temporalities—

of ephemeral socialities and intimacies they hold—that offer refuge from the phobic majoritarian public sphere. Staying in, at home or in the closet, might undermine one’s queer political subjecthood expected to arrive at and manifest as the act of both going and coming out. However, as Amin points out, this tendency toward idealization “puts an idealizing strain on the relationship between scholarship and culture,” wherein queer culture and its social forms, as always already emergent, are weighed down with the overwhelming task of representing and forging alternative social worlds that queer scholarship must locate.¹²

Queer studies desires and pursues an idealized notion of queer world making within social forms, in a way that overlooks how queer studies can and should also engage with what might not be that ideal, exceptional, or even all that social—with something like the banal, boring, and asocial act of staying in. This is not to say that Asian American studies, queer studies, and other minoritarian fields of knowledge should turn away from political desires and investments in the social. Rather, this is to point out that what also needs to be addressed within the social and relational turn are the psychic burdens and affective labors of sociality that slip into a compulsory sociability, wherein, as a result, relationality becomes conflated with and eclipsed by relatability, as if both mean and do the same thing.

Staying in is a mode of performance that grapples with the difficulties of navigating social worlds and the need to sometimes pull back from them and insists on the distinctions, however momentary, slippery, or brief, between relatability and relationality, wherein the former upholds a compulsory relation to the social that forecloses the possibilities of the latter. In parsing out the distinctions between relationality and relatability, we can alleviate ourselves, and the social worlds through which we move, from the compulsory aspects of sociability: we can give ourselves room to breathe; we can stay in without feeling like we are missing out on too much, if only for an evening or a weekend. To have the need and desire for time away from others, from an outside, whether for pleasure or rest, or both, does not hold up a depoliticized fantasy of autonomy—it does not produce static obstructions to minoritarian world-making practices. Rather, it points toward the desire to want to relate, to show up for another, but when one is ready, and in ways that alter the horizon of what constitutes the social, and the political projects, collectivities, affiliations, and models of care borne out of it. What I want to arrive at, then, is something against relatability, but for relation, the contours of which begin to emerge through forms of Asian American asociality that do not turn away from the painful, tiring urgency of the contemporary moment as much as offer sustained and sustaining ways of getting through it, of

moving through a world that is messy, damaging, hurtful, and exhausting for so many.

Indeed, in the bleakness of what Zoë H. Wool and Julie Livingston call “a broader historical moment characterized by the proliferation of disasters that are lived as endemic conditions,” staying in seems like a risk that runs counter to the necessity for radical, collective, organized action within the social worlds in which we live.¹³ It would seem that none of us should or can afford to stay in. Amid ongoing disaster, social life and its worlds are our transformative sites of refuge and change. However, as Wool and Livingston point out, it is precisely the turbulence of the present moment that muddies our attachments to the social, troubles the presumed vitality and redemptive qualities of social life, and makes us question whether or not social life can always give us what we need. What subsequently emerge are “collateral afterworlds,” “sites of disaffection and stasis,” “that roll along off to the side of efforts to stabilize, repair, and improve any collective lot in the name of the future.”¹⁴ These worlds are not wholly apocalyptic, for within their incoherence, where futurity has a vexed relation to the present, other makeshift, adjacent, unanticipated ethical orientations and forms of relationality can and must emerge.

To think of the afterworlds in which we find ourselves is to address how sociality, figured as that upon which our future depends, can be exhausting: psychically, when we do not know how to stay happy or even okay in the face of the ongoing normalization of disaster, and physically, when we do not know how many more evenings we can spend at meetings and political actions, out on the street, or elsewhere. If relationality, as Hentyle Yapp writes, is constituted by its expiration “that restarts the impulse to relate” and directs us toward an ethical orientation “that emphasizes continually attending and returning to the particularities” of minoritarian difference, then relations within the social are constituted by exertion, effort, and exhaustion.¹⁵ The repetitive ethical necessity to relate makes it necessary to consider what kind of livable conditions allow for collective action and organizing to be built and sustained in the midst of crisis that is not and never has been exceptional in the United States. We would do well to address the exhausting work of sociality and collectivity and, moreover, the need and desire for rest, aloneness, and moments of asociality that come with it.

While going out into the streets in protest, going out to be with others, and the desire to be seen and heard are crucial to the kinds of flourishing that minoritarian political critique seeks beyond the grind of everyday life, there is also the need for staying in, which is not antithetical to but, rather, enfolded within and adjacent to these acts and desires. Both staying in and going out are necessary for living within the social worlds to which we are lovingly and frustratingly attached. Sometimes all

we might need is time alone or only with a few loved ones; sometimes we might need to “stay put” and stay in.¹⁶

The small, banal worlds created by staying in—say, the act of playing with oneself—are not spaces of isolation and loneliness that reject relation. To be critical of relatability and compulsory sociability is not to say that artists like Mitski and Vuong do not create work open to collective identification by audiences, readers, and fans. After all, the blow dealt to us while viewing Mitski’s video comes from how familiar and devastating this rejection feels. The audience’s delight that we also feel when listening to Vuong’s ode comes from knowing what it means to spend this “free” time alone. As a singer-songwriter and a lyric poet, Mitski and Vuong work in genres wherein the autobiographical self—and in their cases, too, the autoerotic self—is highly present and crucial as the main subject of their material. That said, I am struck by how their disclosures of the self occur through narratives of nonencounters with others: through the failed flirtation that cannot follow through and leaves one alone with oneself, or through masturbation that brings one further into oneself. They relate by way of the asociality of the nonencounter as suspended, provisional moments of pause, hesitation, and rest. They relate by staying in, not as a turning away from others as much as a turning toward oneself, wherein the asociality of staying in offers respite, as well as the possibility for play and self-pleasure, for the multiple ways one can hold and be held by one’s own hand, at one’s hand.

Staying in dynamically affords one the time and space needed to evade compulsory forms of sociability that late liberalism and subsequent formations of political resistance demand in the present moment. With an attention toward staying in, we can assess how compulsory sociability at times undergirds what we deem to be productive, meaningful, radical forms of relationality and solidarity that ground minoritarian social movements, political critique within minoritarian fields of study such as Asian American studies, and the collective pursuit of social justice. As a form of Asian American asociality, staying in activates an Asian Americanist mode of critique occupying those asocial, collateral afterworlds depleted by the demands of social life yet filled with the “free” and “inexhaustible” pleasures, autoerotic or otherwise, of asocial life. Through Mitski’s and Vuong’s movements in the realm of the asocial, I locate the problem of sociality that Asian Americans represent, and the political desires it articulates and makes possible, within the racial logics of the United States, within minoritarian knowledges and fields of study, and more specifically, in the formation of Asian American studies.

“After You”: Terms of Accommodation

When considering the contemporary production and emergence of Asian Americans as recognizable, legible subjects, it is often through terms not just of assimilation but also of accommodation. Asian Americans have been rendered as accommodating to the nation-state, whether as the ideal worker meeting demands for cheap, flexible labor or as the assimilable, upwardly mobile model minority and citizen participating within the socialities of institutionalized spaces and its management of minority difference.¹⁷ As accommodating subjects within liberal multiculturalism, Asian Americans are, as Vijay Prashad writes, the “solution” to the problem that blackness presents in the United States.¹⁸ To approach the production of Asian American subjectivity through its accommodating terms addresses how Asian American subjects are constituted by a perceived willingness and capacity to fit in—to be beholden to others’ uses of them as that “solution” within other preexisting discourses on racial difference. Asian Americanness as accommodating is feminized, passive, and submissive, moored to the domestic and the discreet, as what Vivian L. Huang calls “hospitable thresholds” and “a necessary prop in the scene of hospitality,” staged within the sphere of the home, as serviceable, private, and privately disposed to others’ needs and inclinations.¹⁹

Yet although accommodating subjects, Asian Americans are belated, behind on socialization or social development, behind in that they are always in the footsteps of those who are already properly socialized and/or politicized. While they are then the “solution,” they themselves are not particularly soluble or sociable. They are those who must respond or answer to someone else; they are those who appear to have arrived late to politics and a politicizing discourse, or to what is deemed a normative, respectable lifestyle as “honorary whites.” They occupy the time of the after, the polite accommodating phrase “after you.” Upon their late arrival, they must act discreet so as not to disrupt the social, political dynamics already at play: they are late to the party or whatever social scene.²⁰ Accommodation presupposes that there is another for and to whom one must relate that comes before oneself.

To be accommodating is to be available, accessible, and amicable yet unassuming and unobtrusive. To be accommodating is to be relatable, as the knowledgeable and self-knowing subject, who must labor for and on behalf of another’s ignorance. To be accommodating is then not simply to be the knowing, self-possessed, and therefore empowered subject, for sometimes such accommodation can corner the subject into the coercive, unwelcome, reductive teaching moments that deplete and diminish the self for the sake of another’s political awareness and consciousness.²¹ It is through an attention to the racialized accommodating terms producing

Asian Americanness that we can address and critique compulsory sociability, as well as the labors of relatability extracted from cultural objects, minoritarian subjects, and minoritarian knowledges.

As a field of minoritarian knowledges, Asian American studies has undergone changes in its scope and approach, taking into account the shifting US relationship to and varying investments in the Asia-Pacific region throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the broader histories of empire, colonization, and diaspora within the trans-pacific region, and the possibilities of and for cross-racial and cross-ethnic affiliations that emerge by way of comparative racialization.²² Rooted in the field's radical historical emergence in the university during the 1960s and 1970s, these crucial interventions flesh out forms of solidarity by unearthing histories of overlapping social worlds and movements. At the same time, the field must contend with its own institutionalization, as a discipline yoked to the neoliberal university's management and containment of minoritarian difference, simultaneously facing the possibility of defunding and disassembly. As such, Asian American studies is precariously enfolded, working from the inside and confounding distinctions between exclusion and inclusion historically and disciplinarily, simultaneously resistant and complicit, moving within itself as a field and the institution.

Asian Americans occupy an ambiguous position within social life and political discourse as accommodating, assimilative, awkward subjects, while Asian American studies occupies a resistant and complicit position within the academy. More broadly, then, Asian Americanness has a troubled relation to and from the inside, as that which is not in the in-crowd but nevertheless moves, problematically, from within.²³ That said, why do we remain attached to the idea that what constitutes the radical, transformative capacities of Asian Americanist critique and Asian American political subjectivity is the practice of reading and evaluating Asian American subjects and objects for the ways they are either inside or outside narratives of assimilation, incorporation, and institutionalization? Put differently, why do we still demand a resolutely antiassimilative and anti-institutional resistance from the subjects and objects with which we engage? How can we imagine, reorient, and remap the trajectories of Asian Americanist critique and its ethical orientations so that we might foster and enact forms of relating and caring for others not solely defined against the horizons of assimilation and institutionalization? What other horizons can be imagined, outlined, and reached—from inward and within?

As a means out of this predicament, Asian American studies as a field and *Asian American* as a demarcated political subjectivity must wrestle with their positions from what Robyn Wiegman calls “the side of

institutionalization that takes it as an established fact.”²⁴ To find ourselves on this side is to confront how, in the contemporary moment, “identity knowledges have been transformed by their transit through the university” and to take seriously the political desires that shape our attachments to certain objects of study within and outside institutionalization.²⁵ Alongside Wiegman, I argue that Asian American studies and contemporary Asian American political subjectivity must also find a way out of a critical stance constituted only by its resistance to assimilation. Like this side of institutionalization, both are on this side of assimilation “as an established fact.”²⁶ Asian Americanist critique, and the fields and subjects it shapes and moves through, must strive for other sustainable, pleasurable ways of living on this side, with and in relation to others. To be clear, I am not saying Asian Americans and Asian American studies are too far gone, or that both are already fully assimilated, as if such a thing were even possible in the first place. To work from this side of assimilation is to address how, in the contemporary moment, the antiassimilative turn is not enough as the basis for an Asian American politics, Asian Americanist critique, and Asian American solidarity, affiliations, and relationships with others through minoritarian difference. We should remain dissatisfied with a way of living and relating to others rooted solely in the exhausting work of being against the coercive fantasy of assimilation; we should desire something more from the critical, turbulent interiority that Asian Americanism holds within and can share without. For as seen through Mitski and Vuong, such interiority as that shaped by staying in gives way not only to austere and cold loneliness but also to the inexhaustible riches and warm indulgence of taking pleasure in one’s own self, body, and company.

Asian Americanist critique, as it emerges from and is entangled with insurgent social movements and processes of institutionalization, is a particularly resonant site for examining fantasies of political efficacy and equivalence reliant on forms of sociality, their formations of and appeals to subjecthood, and the institutionalized minoritarian knowledges and fields attached to them. From this side and from within, this article inhabits the asociality of “after you” as a mode of Asian Americanist critique. From the space of “after you,” I ask, what do Mitski’s and Vuong’s asocial acts of staying in call up and prompt within Asian Americanist critique and the potential relationalities and ethical reorientations it might forge? How might staying in undo the linear narratives of Asian American political subjecthood that must begin with complicity and end with radical resistance?

To be “after you” is to create strange and estranging forms that shift how we understand and enact the critical interiority of Asian Americanism as standoffish, stalling, and a little if not wholly unrelatable, within what we deem to be meaningful forms of sociality and collectivity. To

stay in “after you” is to insist on tardiness, slowness, lateness, and the problems for sociality and socializing presented by such qualities and the temporalities through which they move—to insist on coming after, but not catching up, from this side. It is the tension and ensnarement of the lag between resistance and complicity, between the social and the antisocial, wherein the solitude of Asian American asociality and its attendant modes of critique reside. From within—in one’s bedroom alone or, as considered below, at a show or another social gathering alone—expressive and desirous languages and forms of nonequivalence, loosened from the grasp of relatability, are shaped and shared out.

Going to Shows Alone

Throughout her US tour for her fourth album, *Puberty 2* (2016), Mitski answered a series of tweets from her fans who were planning to attend her shows. In addition to fans looking for an extra ticket to a sold-out show, there were also fans who had already bought their tickets and were looking for someone who would give them a ride if they could not drive or, better yet, someone who would want to go with them so they would not have to show up alone. Mitski would retweet these requests for a date, for a ride, or for an extra ticket, connecting fans with one another when she could. Alongside these tweets, she would also tweet to fans letting them know they always had another option: they could go to her shows alone.

One fan’s tweet turned to Mitski for advice, asking, “How do u feel about going to shows by yourself? For example, I wanna go see you in Jacksonville, but my friends are lame.”²⁷ In response, Mitski wrote, “I prefer to go alone, I can come+go as I please+b in my own head instead of think abt whether my friends’ having fun.”²⁸ In another tweet addressing similar questions, she wrote, “You can go to shows alone! you can go alone talk to no one feel the music then go home. abolish the notion of going to shows to be seen.”²⁹ For Mitski, it seems, live performance and the scenes built by and around it are not always the sites of recognition from which collectivity inevitably springs, nor should they be. Mitski does not urge her fans to put themselves out there for the sake of making friends; she does not promise that her shows, or any music shows, for that matter, always offer this kind of connection. Instead, Mitski advocates for a way of going out, a way of being at a show or performance alone, that takes the form of staying in, of turning and keeping oneself inward, to “b in my own head.” This might sound like a cynical view that forecloses performance’s world-making capacities; it might depressingly cut performance off from the vitality of the social worlds through which it moves. Alternatively, I understand Mitski’s articulations of going to shows alone, the act of staying in it cultivates, and the weariness and wariness around the social

obligations that come with being seen or out with friends to convey the porous and difficult dimensions of sociality and its relation to the political, critique, and aesthetics that such a reading would suggest.

While Mitski speaks of aloneness and the desire to come and go as she pleases, she herself is an artist reaching out and responding to her fans, facilitating meet-ups, groupings, or pairings on their behalf—ones that would happen only because of her shows. Additionally, as a singer-songwriter playing mostly within the independent music scenes, Mitski performs and works within a music genre constituted by a perceived authentic transparency through intimate, confessional narratives of the self. Mitski's insistence on her fans' interiority and invisibility at her shows is enabled by her own exteriority and visibility onstage. What she provides her fans through social media interactions, her shows, and her music are both a scene of collective belonging and an interior unseen space and subject position for one to step into and hide. Going to shows alone then becomes a practice of staying in, as that which disrupts the narrative trajectory of recognizable relations within the social, which often assume you will always find your people in the crowd, that you will not go home alone when the show is over, or that the show itself might provide one with a shared revelatory experience that sheds light not only on the performer but also on oneself.

Mitski's shows give space for the necessity and desire in being alone when friends are feeling either like they are not enough in the support they provide or like they are too much—a worrisome burden to manage. That said, notice how Mitski's fan's wording conveys that, even though she might be feeling left out by her "lame" friends who do not want to go, she also does not want to make her friends do something they do not want to do. To go to shows alone lets you be on your own "instead of think abt whether [your] friends' having fun," which is another way of caring for your own time and space, as well as that of your friends. The fan's question to Mitski and the slight she directs to her friends are the expression of an ethical attunement to the boundaries and limits of friendship that is playfully antagonistic and exasperated, and nevertheless structured by care. On the other side of staying in, wherein one renders oneself unaccommodating to legible, recognizable formations of the social, are then the kinship, love, and accommodation of one's friends, who might not be in the room but precisely because you are sparing them from whatever scene they might not want to enter with you.

Mitski's cultivation of her own guarded interiority is one of mixed signals. This becomes evident in the differences between Mitski's way of communicating with fans directly online and her live performances that are quiet, almost hostile in her unwillingness to engage too much or too enthusiastically with her crowd. During her shows, Mitski rarely speaks

between songs. Once in a while she might mention the astrological forecast: when I saw her play at the Bowery Ballroom in 2016 she told us there was a strawberry moon in the sky, told us to look outside at this rare occurrence, and also told us what it might mean for her mood and ours. Following applause and shouts of “I love you!” from the audience, she uttered with soft-spoken gratitude a “thank you” but with the refusal to meet and match the fervor of such adoration.³⁰ Sometimes her responses varied. In one 2016 review for a show she played in Denver, Colorado, a music critic called the performance “distant” and wrote, “Audience interactions were not the smoothest—at one point, Mitski deflected an enthusiastic fan’s declaration of love by saying she had earplugs in.” Disappointed, the critic stated, “Even the few smiles Mitski let slip all night seemed like they were for herself.”³¹ This puzzling contrast between her interactions with fans online and her live presence onstage could be attributed to the broader concerns around the diminishment and degradation of social life within contemporary American culture, and specifically concerns that social media further enable the isolating behaviors of being “alone together” as subjects who are more connected but less concerned with caring for each other.³² However, I understand these mismatched modes, and the humor of such nonresponses and the curves of the nonencounter, as sites of ethical reorientation to others, wherein unrecognizable and certainly at times frustrating modes of relating occur, at the limits of sociality, as the fraught, racialized space Asian Americans inhabit.

“Not Well-Rounded” at the Limits of Sociality

In their work on racial melancholia and dissociation in the clinic and in the classroom, David Eng and Shinhee Han state that, while Asian Americans are seen as economically or academically successful in their “enclosed but also passive self-sufficiency,” they are not seen as “well-rounded”:

From an academic point of view, the model minority stereotype also delineates Asian American studies as academically successful but rarely “well-rounded”—“well-rounded” in tacit comparison to the unmarked (white) student body. . . . This nearly successful assimilation attempts to cover over the gap—the failure of “well-roundedness”—as well as that unavoidable ambivalence resulting from this tacit comparison in which the Asian American student is seen as lacking.³³

I am struck by this assessment—by the connotations of not being “well-rounded”—and want to stay in its implications for thinking about Asian Americans as subjects neither wholly resistant nor complicit with the social schemas, movements, or discourses around them. This failure to be well-rounded, and instead too insular, too separate, can be mapped

onto language around the loner, the awkward nerd, the one who does not work well in groups or with others, the one who cannot socialize properly, who does not take part in enough extracurricular group activities. In other words, to not be well-rounded means to not be that social: to be alone, to not be personable, to not be a good team player or a cooperative collective member.³⁴

On the other side of this, to be well-rounded is to be white. The well-roundedness of whiteness is passably self-sufficient, but not so much so that it closes itself off to the world. In fact, whiteness produces itself by way of having the whole world available to it. What part of this accessibility of the world to whiteness, and the legacies of colonialism and slavery it holds, is couched in discourses on proper sociality and sociability, by way of a term like *well-rounded*, which also implies a self that is self-possessed and self-contained? How might we rethink the failure that Asian American students are said to represent, particularly alongside what has been previously addressed as the shortcomings and dissatisfactions with Asian American studies as an interdisciplinary area of study? Seemingly, to not be well-rounded is to be closed off from the world, to have a passive relation to it, both willfully and unwillfully in one's own interiority as insular and unchanging. Given whiteness's orientation to the world, Asian Americans' relation to it figured through maladjusted forms of asociality is not a failure but instead a critique of how understandings of the social and the relational are based on individuated and autonomous formations of the subject that do not and cannot hold.

The now-defunct Tumblr blog *Asians Sleeping in the Library*, created in 2010, offers another means of approaching the Asian American student as the figure simultaneously of academic success and of social failure.³⁵ The blog, started by a white student at Birmingham University, collected a series of photos of Asian students sleeping alone in various odd, and at times seemingly uncomfortable, positions in college libraries. The blog's description stated, "Asians sleeping in the library: they're better at life and they get better grades than you for a reason. Pictures of Asian students from universities sleeping in the library and lecture halls."³⁶ The images were meant to be humorous for depicting the lengths Asian students would go for a good grade rather than for a party. The blog's joke rested on the disjuncture between Asians being "better at life" while also failing at it in their exhaustion. In 2012 the blog was taken down due to criticism, yet its cached images in shared links on social media platforms such as Facebook, as well as on Google Images search, still circulate.

I briefly pause on this blog, for what I noticed on encountering its images is what that failure of well-roundedness looked like and what it invoked. It took the form of sleeping solitary figures, curled up with their sweaters or laptops as makeshift pillows, with office chairs arranged into

enclosed, protective structures built for comfort, whether for a quick nap or for an entire night's rest. To be sure, these images and the premise around them are disturbingly intrusive for the ways they are taken without the sleeping subjects' consent, and for how they reiterate the model minority myth of Asian Americans as hard workers. Yet I want to insist on reading these images differently, as not solely ones of ridicule and humiliation. I read these images for the ways their sleeping figures lie around in public spaces but do not let you in on their dreamy interior life; they are exhausted for reasons that we cannot fully know but that we can imagine might be due to the stresses and maneuvers required to move through the world as racialized, marked, and therefore not well-rounded, subjects.³⁷

The images might be read as representations of the excessive, unhealthy lengths Asian American students will go to do well and overachieve. For me, these images might also show us the private postures, gestures, and forms of subjects with a public, stubborn indifference to fitting in, to giving into the compulsory sociability of life in late liberalism. On the other side of this, while being "better at life" might be understood as enabling certain fantasies of self-possessed, autonomous personhood converging with the model minority myth of self-sufficiency, these images show us something else: in these haphazard, thrown-together spaces of respite, we are given something messier, more unfinished that shows a particular desire, capacity, openness, and willfulness to seeking out care and one's own comfort. Indeed, this is attested to by Eng and Han's research and collaborative work on Asian American students in the university, on Asian American mental wellness, and on Asian American students' need and desire for what Eng and Han call, by way of D. W. Winnicott, a "holding environment," such as Asian American studies or the clinic.³⁸ The problem of the social that Asian Americans have been racialized to represent, as subjects who stay in, then has the ability to rearrange how we think of subjecthood and sociality within forms of kinship, affiliation, intimacy, relation, and care.

I focus on the Asian American subject as the student because of the scope of Eng and Han's work on Asian American students, but also because I am thinking of how often we are told as teachers that the university and our classroom are sites for socializing students. The classroom is a site for preparing students, for getting them accustomed to the world as adults, who must take initiative and put in work with colleagues, with a cohort, or, to use the language that blurs the boundaries and distributions of neoliberal labor, with a "team." As teachers, workers, and representatives of the university, we are expected to condition students into becoming responsible subjects of the nation-state and its various institutional structures. As such, the academy produces and regulates normative categorizations of difference within its implementation of disciplines that in turn shape social life.³⁹

Given this, it seems that part of the issue with Asian American students is how they are anticipated to have problems with entry into normative socialization, given their status as students. In other words, Asian Americans seem to present a problem to and of sociality and social life, whether on a college campus, at a party, at a productive working environment, or elsewhere. The failure of well-roundedness, of being properly social and socialized, problematically constitutes Asian Americanness and for that very reason becomes all the more generative for an Asian Americanist mode of critique. On the other side of not being well-rounded, sociable, or social enough is not only exhaustion but also relief from compulsory forms of sociability and, as Mitski and Vuong show, the pleasures of going solo. While asociality might be seen as always already on the other side of sociality, I insist that asociality gives shape to a different kind of desire for and within sociality, one that has not yet been figured out or acted upon. I stay with the asociality implied in the designation of not being well-rounded as a particular divestment from normative, well-behaved, likable, socialized forms of subjectivity that both refuse and are refused by Asian American subjects.

After, in the Style Of

From the position of the not well-rounded, I turn to the moment “after you,” on the edge of sociality, that Ocean Vuong inhabits in his poem “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” included in his collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016). The first version of the poem, published in 2015 in the *New Yorker*, begins with a dedication that is also a citation. It reads, “After Frank O’Hara / After Roger Reeves.”⁴⁰ Like his “Ode to Masturbation,” staying in as a means of accessing self-pleasure and love first comes from without, outward from others. The horizon of “someday” is grasped through the work of other poets: from O’Hara, a midcentury New York School poet, and Reeves, a contemporary poet. The title of Vuong’s poem comes from the last lines in O’Hara’s 1953 poem “Katy”: “Someday I’ll love Frank O’Hara. / I think I’ll be alone for a little while.”⁴¹ These last lines are also taken up for the title of a poem by Roger Reeves called “Someday I’ll Love Roger Reeves.”⁴² The possibilities for loving oneself then emerge when one comes after another.

In “Katy,” O’Hara begins with the lines, “They say I mope too much / but really I’m loudly dancing.”⁴³ He explains, “I dance, / I am never quiet. I mean silent.”⁴⁴ These lines moving underneath and before Vuong’s own add breath and body to Vuong’s poem, letting us know that the solitude of staying in oneself is anything but lonely, silent, quiet, or still. To be after O’Hara is to be in relation and response to another. What appears to be mopey and self-indulgent, lingering in the switch between

“quiet” and “silent,” in the quick self-corrective, “I mean,” is the not well-rounded space of asociality, wherein the poet as the misfit, the queer, the refugee, the Asian, needs to be alone for a little while. Within “I mean,” as a small skip in pace, Vuong’s poem comes after, as the time and shape of the generous, critical gesture—of “please, after you”—that passes on and before Vuong. “After you” becomes doubled, as a temporal marker and as aesthetic, poetic form. For Vuong, to be after is to come after O’Hara and Reeves, to be in their wake, and to be in their style. While Vuong writes of a self-love that is out of reach and that has yet to arrive, it is nevertheless enabled in that moment of refusing to be the only one who makes this promise to oneself, someday.

In “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” Vuong addresses himself by his first name with lines that repeat the assurances “don’t be afraid” and “don’t worry.”⁴⁵ Such fears and worries are ones of being left alone with and left behind by the memories of his childhood and by loved ones—of his mother, his father, or a lover. The poem begins, “Ocean, don’t be afraid. / The end of the road is so far ahead / it is already behind us.”⁴⁶ Later, he writes, “Don’t worry. Just call it *horizon* / & you’ll never reach it”⁴⁷: to be after, or behind looking toward the horizon, is in another way to be ahead of the horizon. Vuong’s fears and worries are shaped into a form of dwelling in his or another’s leaving, propelling him toward what is ahead, toward a someday that is neither better nor utopic, merely elsewhere.

In the closing of the poem, Vuong writes,

. . . Ocean. Ocean—
get up. The most beautiful part of your body
is where it’s headed. & remember,
loneliness is still time spent
with the world. Here’s
the room with everyone in it.
Your dead friends passing
through you like wind
through a wind chime. Here’s a desk
with the gimp leg & a brick
to make it last. Yes, here’s a room
so warm & blood-close,
I swear, you will wake—
& mistake these walls
for skin.⁴⁸

The urgency in the repetition of self-address, “Ocean. Ocean— / get up,” moves Vuong into the horizon of where his body is headed, into the space that comes after all of the *afters* laid before us and him. This horizon,

strung together by *afters* that follow one another, is marked by a closeness to O'Hara and Reeves, one that is not given over to sociality or the futurity it might be said to hold. The immediacy of sociality is given the lag of the *after*, and in coming after, Vuong is, from a backward position, looking forward at a moment that will also pass him by.

Vuong writes, "remember, / loneliness is still time spent with the world," and although Vuong speaks of loneliness, this loneliness does not obstruct the social, for like his hand that tethers him to other bodies in "Ode to Masturbation," his loneliness still places him in a "room with everyone in it." The "someday" where his body is headed is one where he feels himself at and as home. In this home, the walls around him are not psychic blocks that render him as the pathologically antisocial—alone and not well-rounded—but instead are the walls of his own skin, "so warm & blood-close" that hold and carry him into what lies ahead, while also housing friends who have left him behind. He finds himself in and as a home with lopsided, imperfect furniture, for with "a desk / with the gimp leg & a brick / to make it last." His space of refuge is one that only he inhabits, and one that only he is so familiar with, that he, addressed as "you," will mistake it for his skin. Like those random, quickly built beds or resting spaces made by tired, sleepy students in the library, these imperfect spaces close to the skin, and of skin, hold and protect Vuong.

Staying in, within the moment "after you," is anything but still and unchanging, for in Vuong's poem, in what would otherwise be thought of as dead air, between "quiet" and "silent," reverberate wind chimes—a melancholic music that leaves a trace of his friends', his family's, his lovers', and his own leaving, like a door opening and closing to let someone either in or out. The sound is a resonant form of solitude that marks how one has been left alone but also how such leaving alone gives way to an ethical orientation borne out of asociality, as the ill-adjusted, bad socializer who might not show up, like Vuong who stays in and with his own skin, or the loner who does show up but is alone and unapproachable, like sleeping students or Mitski and her fans. To be alone, which is also to be left behind "after you" and with what comes after, is to find oneself remaining in a space where one can play alone, among "lop-sided furniture" or with the caress of one's hand, "a hand / to this blood / -warm body."⁴⁹

At the same time, one can also choose to go out, again. In "Your Best American Girl," Mitski sings to the American boy, "Don't wait for me / I can't come," imploring him and his new American girl to leave her behind where she cannot get off, as she sits with her guitar alone. For as she sings, "You have so much to do / and I have nothing ahead of me." The kinds of futurity reserved for the "all-American," accessible through the intimacy of the couple, do not give her pleasure: she cannot come.

They are neither made for her nor that with which she can keep up. But her request to be left behind is not the same as the acceptance of isolation and exclusion or the rejection of futurity and pleasure. In other words, perhaps it is not that she cannot get off because she is on her own. Rather, to insist “don’t wait for me” is to say that perhaps she cannot come precisely because of the way this couple inhabits space and that instead she prefers to opt out, especially now that one has been let off the hook from the narratives and forms of relationality and intimacy often used as sites of socialization, development, and adjustment. To be let off the hook is to be paid no mind and can also lead to one’s exit, to one leaving the setup one finds oneself in, even if the setup is one’s very own music video. For although Mitski sings of having nothing ahead of her except the interiority of her own thoughts, desires, and doubts, it is she who at the end of the video is shown walking off the video’s set and opening the doors to leave the space, while the white couple stays behind, trapped and bound in their own embrace, each other’s spit, and an American flag.

To not be the “best American girl,” like Mitski, and to be “other bodies,” like Vuong, afford certain movements that might not otherwise be available, ones that can and might lead to forms of relating but also of leaving, when the social scene at hand might be too boring, too demanding, or too exhausting to maintain. To stay in, to turn inward, stroking one’s own face, kissing one’s own fingers, getting oneself off, are not lonely, selfish, claustrophobic acts. To stay in is to give oneself a moment, a critical yet pleasurable pause that conveys a different kind of desire for oneself and others, the desire to relate differently, in order to live through what and who comes to pass, before asking oneself again, “Should I stay in or go out?” and deciding that, maybe this time, one is ready to go out.

Notes

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1. For more on the confessional voice in singer-songwriter/popular music, see Dougher, “Authenticity, Gender, and Personal Voice.” On inscrutability and Asian American femininity, see Huang, “Inscrutably, Actually.”

2. Vuong, “Ode to Masturbation” (video).
3. Vuong, “Ode to Masturbation,” 61.
4. Vuong, “Ode to Masturbation,” 65.
5. Vuong, “Ode to Masturbation,” 64.
6. Vuong, “Ode to Masturbation,” 65.
7. Vuong, “Ode to Masturbation,” 67.
8. See Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation.”

9. In mentioning transparency, I am referring to Christina A. León's critique of the demand for minoritarian subjects to be transparent and, in turn, the aesthetic cultivation of opacity. See León, "Forms of Opacity," 377–80.

10. I am thinking of Adriana Cavarero's work on inclination as a feminized position and ethical form that remains radically open to others. See Cavarero, *Inclinations*.

11. For critiques on the institutionalization and incorporation of critical race and ethnic studies, women's, gender, and sexuality studies, and minority difference within the academy, see Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*; and Ahmed, *On Being Included*.

12. Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 6.

13. Wool and Livingston, "Collateral Afterworlds," 2.

14. Wool and Livingston, "Collateral Afterworlds," 3, 1.

15. Yapp, "Feeling Down(town Julie Brown)," 6.

16. I am thinking of Gayatri Gopinath's articulation of the queer diasporic subject not only as one who leaves and migrates from the private, domestic, feminized space of the home but also as one who, in "staying put," inhabits a different relation to queer diaspora. See Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 14–15.

17. For scholarship that mines the relation between Asian bodies, embodiment, and labor, see Day, *Alien Capital*; Manalansan, "Servicing the World"; Lye, *America's Asia*; and Kang, *Compositional Subjects*.

18. Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk*, 6.

19. Huang, "'Inscrutably, Actually,'" 6, 5.

20. For instance, Laura Hyun Yi Kang talks about "Asian/American" women as the "belated" subjects of feminism. See Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 166.

21. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes on "a plethora of ignorances," which "far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth" (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 8). Also see Kandice Chuh's critique of "aboutness" within academia and its organization and management of fields of knowledge and disciplines, which also hinges on the multiplicity of ignorances' effects and demands on the minoritarian knowledgeable subject / subject of knowledge. Chuh, "It's Not about Anything." Similarly, I am thinking of how Audre Lorde writes of the "task to educate" "as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival," impressed on women of color as "an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns" ("Master's Tools," 113).

22. For recent work on the transpacific within Asian American studies and American studies, see Durr and Schorch, *Transpacific Americas*; Shu and Pease, *American Studies as Transnational Practice*; Hoskins and Nguyen, *Transpacific Studies*; and Saranillio, "Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters." Much scholarship has come out of comparative and critical ethnic studies; for more recent scholarship that aims to critically revisit and engage with the field's approaches, see Ferguson and Hong, *Strange Affinities*; and Elia et al., *Critical Ethnic Studies*.

23. I am thinking of Leslie Bow's work on Asian American women's literature that articulates Asian American women as disloyal subjects who transgress boundaries of the nation-state and/or lines of racial and ethnic difference. See Bow, *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion*.

24. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 6.

25. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 7.

26. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 7.

27. Demers, "@mitskileaks how do u feel."

28. Miyawaki, “I prefer to go alone.”

29. Miyawaki, “you can go to shows alone!”

30. These are my observations taken from when I have seen her perform: at Brooklyn Steel on April 29, 2017, and at the Bowery Ballroom on June 20, 2016.

31. Ao, “A Distant Mitski.”

32. See Turkle, *Alone Together*; and Putnam, *Bowing Alone*.

33. Eng and Han, “Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” 351.

34. It is important to mention the ongoing lawsuit against Harvard University filed in 2014 by the organization Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), backed by conservative legal strategist Edward Blum, which claims that the university’s race-conscious admissions policies discriminate against Asian American applicants by implementing race-based quotas. Alongside SFFA’s complaint is a similar case, filed in 2015 by the Asian American Coalition for Education (AACE) against Harvard University and other universities such as Yale University, Columbia University, and University of Chicago, which has led to an investigation by the US Departments of Justice and Education. These lawsuits take up the neoconservative narrative that race-conscious admissions and affirmative action policies, rather than “negative action” and legacy admissions, take opportunities away from hardworking model minorities, such as Asian Americans, and therefore should be prohibited. In the face of these lawsuits, which claim to speak for Asian Americans, organizations like Asian Americans Advancing Justice and the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, along with thirty-four other Asian American groups and faculty in higher education, have responded by submitting amicus curiae (friend of the court) briefs in support of race-conscious admissions. What is of particular interest is the form that discrimination against Asian American students is said to take, particularly following Harvard’s release of information to the Department of Justice regarding its admissions processes, which included student reports and evaluations. According to SFFA’s analysts, the records show that, while Asian American students scored the highest among racial and ethnic groups on grades, test scores, and extracurricular activities, they scored lower on personal traits and likability. Much like the concerns about not being “well-rounded,” the perception is that Asian American students are less personable and likable. It is troublesome and yet crucial to consider how this articulation of a disadvantage at the level of personality—which is also to say relatability and sociability—is used by the lawsuit as proof of affirmative action’s discrimination. I argue that, rather than insisting on the likability and therefore inclusion and insertion of Asian Americans into personable political subjecthood, it is worth dwelling in such unlikability, in the impersonal, the unpersonable, and the asocial, as another point from which to critique US discourses of minority difference foundational to these policies, and as a further means of readdressing Asians’ and Asian Americans’ relation to categories of the minor, minority, and minoritarian in the contemporary moment. See Chuh, “Asians Are the New . . . What?”; Hartocollis, “Asian-Americans Suing Harvard”; Hartocollis, “Harvard Rated Asian-Americans Lower on Personality Traits”; Hartocollis and Saul, “Affirmative Action Battle”; Gersen, “Uncomfortable Truth”; and Hsu, “The Rise and Fall of Affirmative Action.”

35. The now broken link for the blog is asianssleepinginthelibrary.tumblr.com. Screenshots of the blog can be found in Asian American TV, “‘Asians Sleeping in the Library’ Is a Racist Website!”

36. KoreAm Journal, “Asians Sleeping in the Library.”

37. Here I am reminded of the work of Kevin Quashie and Sarah Jane Cerve-

nak on the significance of and insistence on the radicality of black psychic interiority as quiet, as wandering and fugitive, particularly in the face of racist formations of blackness that produce and reduce black subjects solely through the materiality and surface of the body. See Quashie, *Sovereignty of Quiet*; and Cervenak, *Wandering*.

38. Eng and Han, "Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," 366, quoting Winnicott, *The Maturation Process*. Also see Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*.

39. Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*, 8–18.

40. Vuong, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong" (*New Yorker*).

41. O'Hara, "Katy," 242.

42. Reeves, "Someday I'll Love Roger Reeves," 73.

43. O'Hara, "Katy," 242.

44. O'Hara, "Katy," 242.

45. Vuong, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," 82.

46. Vuong, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," 82.

47. Vuong, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," 82.

48. Vuong, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," 82–83.

49. Vuong, "Ode to Masturbation," 67.

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