



Eyeliners

By Lauren Mark

I would like to offer the song, “This Bitter Earth” by Dinah Washington and Max Richter as a soundtrack to accompany your reading of this piece. Its lyrics and tone match the underlying feeling of this text with an uncanny poignancy.

<https://youtu.be/jXHGoaEtmFM>

When I’m tired, my husband teases me that my eyes look like they have disappeared between the folds of puffy lids.

I used to line the upper lids of my eyes with blue eyeliner, just above my eyelashes to help mark a point of reference.

To look here.

Now, I am grateful for my sunglasses and the broad-brimmed sun visor that I wear when going out for walks. Protecting myself from the Arizona sun makes the distinguishing shape of my eyes less discernible from a distance. Perhaps this makes me seem more human from behind.

I am more than a set of unfathomable eyes.

I am your neighbor

Your teacher

Your student

I feel divorced from myself when I am not around you as if I no longer know who I am.

Yet when I pass you in the street or catch a glimpse of you through an open garage door on an afternoon walk, it feels as if my hair and the shape of my eyes are silent warnings to pause before I call out a greeting, to wait to see if you speak first, or if your eyes soften into something other than indifference, or more frighteningly still, harden into hostility.

This deference to your reactions makes me inwardly contract as if I have somehow misbehaved.

As if I am waiting for you to relieve me from probation and welcome me back into the fold.

Only this fold is a society that is hard to recognize, where new rules have made the disembodied sanitation of virtual communing the new norm.

Where can we push back when headaches arise from staring into the small flatness of monitors?

Because embodiment is now a threat...

Social distancing has somehow, for those who look like me also become emotional distancing.

The news in the language that I read with the most ease is full of numbers of illness and death and doom...

I turn to the sun to warm the chill that creeps into my bones throughout the day to bring forth beads of sweat to glide beside the burgeoning headache, while I wait for ring-toned alerts of friends and family reaching out across the ether space.

In Cathy Park Hong's words, "To be Asian in America during the time of coronavirus is to feel very alone."¹

I have always treaded lightly, not staunchly anchoring myself to any ground.

Movement analysts recently watching me move on Zoom said that I seemed like I wasn't asserting myself in my walking or my stances when I recreate interactions with colleagues. It seemed as if I wasn't claiming space or asserting a definitive presence.

I've navigated four different cultures in my life. They have taught me to observe what's happening around me. How can I, a single individual, compare in scope with the throngs of people and energy outside of and around me? How can I compare with the viral racism circulating in a country where I am a member of the latest scapegoated group?

Although some friends still say that I walk with an outward appearance of calm, it's only a veneer that covers an inward tightness that prepares to deflect unexpected flights that might be thrown my way.

¹ Hong, Cathy Park. (April 12, 2020). *The Slur I never expected to hear in 2020*. Retrieved April 13, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/magazine/asian-american-discrimination-coronavirus.html>

Just a few days ago, an Asian woman was attacked with what is believed to be acid in Brooklyn.²

In the heartland of the Midwest, an Asian-American family returning to their Minnesotan house came home to a posted sign that said,

“We’re watching you. Take the Chinese virus back to China. We don’t want you here infecting us with your diseases.” Signed “Your friendly neighborhood.”³

My brother and his family live in Minnesota. His son is Eurasian. Will the milkiness of his mother’s skin and the oval shape of his eyes protect him during these upcoming years?

They were here visiting in March, just before lockdowns became official. Fear was already simmering, though. My nephew’s toddling walk and innocent smile brought invitations of welcome from ice cream parlor servers. He is the only person in our family allergic to eggs, which makes most gelato off limits. That early March evening, before Trump and his administration had officially begun branding COVID-19 as the “China virus” in press conferences, when I stepped up to a counter to ask for a scoop, I met with the unsmiling eyes of an employee who glared at me while digging into a vat of ice cream with ungloved hands. His reluctant motions communicated that I should be

² Moore, Tina and Cassady, D. (April 6, 2020). *Brooklyn woman burned outside home in possible acid attack*. Retrieved April 13, 2020, from <https://nypost.com/2020/04/06/brooklyn-woman-burned-outside-home-in-possible-acid-attack/>

³ Rao, M. (March 28, 2020). *Asian-Americans in Minnesota face insults, hostility during virus outbreak*. Retrieved April 29 at <https://www.startribune.com/local-asian-americans-face-insults-hostility/569178982/>

grateful, and that the germs from his bare hands grazing the freshly scooped cream were less contagious than the blackness of my hair.

One week later, a butcher at a local grocery store passed over my queued number until other masked customers waiting behind me in line pointed out the omission. As he reluctantly shifted his eyes to mine, he feigned an inability to understand English when I asked him for chicken thighs, pointing instead to bloody tubs of intestines in nearby vats. I repeated my request in my Midwestern accent several times before he acquiesced, dropping a juice filled bag of the same order on his counter that the women before me had ordered.

Since that moment, for the past two months, the only establishments to which I have ventured include my local Asian grocery store, my Vietnamese tailor, and a local Thai restaurant for occasional take-out. When I emerge from the cocoon of my home, I don't want to have to worry about anything other than safely containing viral spread. I send my green card carrying husband with his neutral Eastern European skin tone to do the shopping at other stores. Now that stay at home orders are slowly being lifted, I wonder if people's spirits will lift too.

To live as an Asian-American in the time of COVID-19 is to blindly search for the contours of an existence that has become more conditional than it has ever been.

