

HL90DI

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**The Immigrant: Navigating Temporality and Class in *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe***

At first glance, Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* displaces the concept of race. The sf universe is a "free-form world," one characterized by a freedom from the "grammar" of race and identity (82). There is barely any explicit mention of racial identity other than a smattering of subtle clues such as the last name of the Protagonist Yu (P.Y.), which suggests an echoing of author Yu's Taiwanese-American identity. Yet, upon closer inspection, the motif of the immigrant is crucial to the novel's treatment of temporality and class: in paralleling cultural foreignness to the idea of genre foreignness, the novel interrogates temporality across geography, as inscribed in language, and how it serves as a power structure at the intersections of socio-economic strata. Underneath it all then lies the larger question of how an immigrant family can discover its own temporal narrative within the sf world.

Despite P.Y. and the author sharing the same names, Yu's ethno-racial status is not easily or directly mirrored within the fictional world of the novel. One would even go so far as to argue that Yu wants us to resist our inclination to read his novel as an autobiographical impulse attuned to authorial ancestry. In one of the first mentions of P.Y.'s immigrant family, P.Y. describes the faraway country that his father had come from without any racial identifiers or historical context,

displaying instead a universalizing tendency. He describes it as a place where people did "rice-farming" with "water buffalo," where it was humid in August, where time travel devices did not exist and life unfolded in "straight lines of chronology" (70). In a language that is almost magically real, creating an effect of the marvelous embedded in the mundane, ordinary details such as the mosquito, "the strangeness of family," and reality's "web of invisible dynamics" offer as much magic and terror to a person (70). One believes P.Y.'s tone of nostalgia, though he certainly must not have experienced it first-hand, especially when he claims that time travel devices would "diminished" this world with its natural rhythms and technologies (70). What is most striking about this description is how P.Y. implies to real places, yet refrains from naming them outright. Through the broad strokes and concrete details, he presents generalized notions of difference between this ancestral island and their present-day world. However, this is also where P.Y. begins to tie the immigrant experience to the idea of time. The father's immigration is not just one across geographical distance, but from one temporality into another. Geographical divides represent distinct genres; a different part of the planet signifies "a different time" (70). There is also a subtle First-/Third-World divide. The island, with its lifestyle of manual labor, poverty, and an absence of advanced technology, possesses a chronology dependent on the rhythms of nature and the technology of simple biology. The "continent of opportunity" offers a different temporal structure, a sf universe that requires knowledge, expertise, technological access, capital, etc. (71) One arrives at the conclusion that time is a construct and an effect of nation-states—immigrants traverse genres, entering into a new temporal structure.

This new temporal structure is what undergirds the overarching narrative in the "science fictional universe" (71). Initially, we think that P.Y.'s father embraces and assimilates into this narrative of reinvention and imagination as a fresh immigrant. There are recognizable immigrant

tropes in the way P.Y. chooses to explain the circumstances surrounding his father's new beginnings: to his father, this sf area was a place representing "opportunity" and "possibility"; he had come "on scholarship," with nothing to his name other than a limited array of possessions. One almost can't help but fill in the blanks after this—we envision something analogous to the American dream, of the immigrant without a penny pulling himself up by his bootstraps and achieving success. Retrospectively, however, in the context of the long trajectory of P.Y.'s father, one can't help but hear a silent repudiation of this immigrant self-actualization narrative. These immigrant tropes are used to ironic effect, to highlight the promise inherent in the sf universe in juxtaposition with the eventual personal and career tragedy that P.Y.'s father faces much later in the book. We do not have to wait that long, in fact, to begin to have doubts about this immigrant narrative. Ten pages after we hear P.Y.'s recount of his father's immigrant backstory, we hear a brief one about P.Y.'s mother as a non-native speaker of English. This is one of the most overt references to a racial identifier and also a core component of the immigrant identity: the issue of language. P.Y.'s mother too came from that "little island in reality" (82). Before immigrating to the sf universe, she had never learned English. Instead, back there, she spoke the island's language, "a private, family language," as well as—an allusion to Taiwan appears—"the mainland language" taught in schools by the nationalists (82). Through this triad of mother tongues, one senses that language is mediated by institutional ideology and the intimacy of home and kinship alike. The sf universe departs from this diversity of linguistic possibilities with the dominant language of English. But, P.Y.'s mother finds it hard to grasp English and its tenses, as they didn't work the same way in her language, one based largely "on the infinitive" (82). The entire endeavor of time-travel is, therefore, tied to such "chronogrammatical principles" inherent within the language that is its modus operandi, its sf

narrative (82). P.Y.'s mother is never quite able to "think fluently in English" like her husband, an inability to truly assimilate into the temporality of English, a possible reason why she finds it hard to be satisfied with her time loop. Viewed through the lens of tropes, tenses, and time, these snapshots allow us to piece together the dominant narrative and temporal structure in the sf universe, as well as the immigrant's aspirations and difficulty. The de-historicizing of the immigrant experience—arriving in hardship and grappling with language—also opens up feelings of alienation to everyone.

As the novel reinforces the parallel between cultural foreignness and genre foreignness, the idea of class comes into play. As part-autobiography and part-instruction manual, P.Y.'s book intersperses sections of instruction and definition with narration. One of these sections, titled "socioeconomic strata," describes outright the genre migration from reality (unincorporated areas of no genre) to sf zones in *Minor Universe 31* (77). Socio-economic class tiers these zones—there are affluent upper-end sf zones which require expense for the upkeep of their simulated environments, the stable, middle-class sf regions, and borderline neighborhoods in the lower-middle reaches which are thinner, poorer, and less substantial in sf experience. Reflected in these stratified zones is the understanding that "possibility" of immigration does not translate to "economic permeability" (78). While this may simply seem like some clinical survey of a locale's demographics, P.Y.'s immigrant family can be seen as occupying that borderline neighborhood. Their poverty (sensed even by the younger P.Y., who articulates it to his dad in a question of "are we poor?") confines them to this in-between space. One of the novel's climactic scenes, of the father meeting with the director of research at the Institute of Conceptual Technology on the "good side of town" (167), illustrates the disparity in socioeconomic class between the immigrant and the native, who struggles to make that "successful transition" (78)

into the sf zone but ultimately fails and has to return to the in-between. A powerful imagery in P.Y.'s observation of the encounter is one of his father "looking like an immigrant, like a bewildered new graduate student in front of the eminent professor, a small man with a small hand in a large foreign country" (184). This is one of the only three instances in the novel that the word "immigrant" is used. The connotation of "immigrant" is one of visceral inequality that P.Y. feels compelled to convey visually. More than just a disparity in class, but also a disparity in how at ease they feel in this world. In terms of their knowledge of how to work the world (with its "secret buttons," "the hidden doors," and "the golden keys" (174)), their mastery and access to such knowledge is analogous to the imbalance between a "graduate student" and "the professor" (184). Visually, the smallness of the immigrant in the expansiveness of the new world emphasizes his minority status and vividly exemplifies the extent of his marginalization—P.Y.'s father struggles to create his own mode of temporality within the dominant, giant framework; an individual against a vast institution. Yet, despite the futility and the structural inequalities, P.Y.'s father is characterized by the same "earnest and often desperate striving for acceptance and assimilation" akin to the immigrants in *Minor Universe 31* (78), believing that his "Self as a kind of problem to be solved" (38). It's this internalization of discipline and rejection that is inherited, a certain "generational" sadness—a way of seeing oneself as the youngest in a "long line of poor, clever men, growing over time, slightly less poor, and slightly more clever, but never wise" (195).

The wisdom that eluded his father—how exactly can an immigrant locate "promise and possibility" apart from a world that "felt just out of his reach"? (175)—is tentatively found by the end of the novel. P.Y. reimagines and reconceptualizes time, discovering for himself alternate temporal/spatial dimensions, "the empty plane" and "the elastic present" (233), which could be

infinitely large. This suggests the possibility of a temporal narration managed from within instead of without. In reconfiguring the relationship between past, present, and future on his own terms, P.Y. escapes the immigrant's "melancholy axis" (196) structured by a "continuum of expectation and competition and striving" passed down from father to son (82).

Ultimately, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* might be what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay would call a historically ambivalent fable (7). The novel presents a story about time-travel and yet, draws the reader into the axiological structures of their families and their cultures through the motif of the immigrant. Marked by loss, national borders, immigration regimes, and an incorporation into dominant temporal structures, the immigrant makes us, as readers, question how we should navigate the sf world. In reading this novel, itself a time machine, we are opening ourselves up to the elastic present, the moment of the infinitely expandable before we turn the last page—living inside P.Y.'s alternative script for the future for as long as we can.

### Works Cited

Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Yu, Charles. *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*. 1st ed., Vintage Books, 2010.