Fictionalizing Marginalized Histories: India, Jamaica, Japan, USA
Category: Fiction Craft & Criticism

Event Description:

Four fiction writers of color discuss how they researched and wrote multi-voiced, multi-generational books drawing from both archival records and family lore, as well as the politics surrounding it. How do the novel and short story form lend themselves to the retelling of marginalized histories? Where and why do these writers blur the line between “truth” and fiction? How do they grapple with representing presumed stereotypes (e.g., “bad mothers,” slavery and Black trauma)?

Statement of Value:

The writers in this panel come from various geopolitical stances and cultures that have been impacted by colonialism, slavery, racism/discrimination, and war. Their discussion of how they preserve histories personal to them and challenge official narratives using fiction is both timely and vital, especially now as books are actively being banned across the United States, including novels and story collections depicting both the suffering and accomplishments of non-European peoples.

Event Organizer:

Kim Coleman Foote: Kim Coleman Foote is the author of Coleman Hill, a novel inspired by her family's Great Migration experience. She has received writing fellowships from the NEA, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Center for Fiction, and NYFA, and holds an MFA in creative writing from Chicago State University.

Event Moderator:

Asako Serizawa: Asako Serizawa is the author of Inheritors, which won the PEN/Open Book Award and The Story Prize Spotlight Award. She has received two O. Henry Prizes, a Pushcart Prize, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers’ Award, and fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, NEA, and MacDowell.
Event Participants:

**Kim Coleman Foote:** Kim Coleman Foote is the author of *Coleman Hill*, a novel inspired by her family's Great Migration experience. She has received writing fellowships from the NEA, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Center for Fiction, and NYFA, and holds an MFA in creative writing from Chicago State University.

**Maisy Card:** Maisy Card is the author of the novel *These Ghosts are Family*, which won an American Book Award, the 2021 OCM Bocas Prize in fiction and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel, The Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, and the LA Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction.

**Shilpi Suneja:** Shilpi Suneja was born in India. She is the author of the novel, *House of Caravans*. Her writing has been supported by a National Endowment for the Arts literature fellowship, a Massachusetts Cultural Council fellowship, and a Grub Street Novel Incubator scholarship.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements:

Welcome to Fictionalizing Marginalized Histories: India, Jamaica, Japan, and USA. Thank you all for joining us today. I hope our discussion provokes thoughts and questions. We'll leave a little time at the end for a Q&A. A few reminders before we begin:

- For anyone needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Please treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Please be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Please do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.
Welcome again. We're here to discuss what it means to fictionalize marginalized histories, the questions this raises, the issues and responsibilities that come with the act of writing difficult, "inconvenient," silenced histories that challenge the official narrative. All our books contend with histories marked by war, colonialism, slavery, racism, and other forms of discrimination; they all reckon with the imprint of lived collective violence and wrestle with difficult, trauma-informed stories, an act that comes with its own set of personal, cultural, and narrative challenges. Why write these histories, these stories? How can we tell or retell them?

What is striking to me is the way we've all used multivocal, multigenerational structures and forms to write these histories as fiction. And when I say "history," I don't mean some kind of past that's over and done with. Histories have roots and ripple effects, and their legacies stay very much alive, continuing to impact our personal and collective worlds. Given the way books are actively being banned across the United States and the way writers continue to be subject to censorship around the world, we thought it would be useful to come together to talk about writing marginalized histories: what the stakes are, how we navigated the research, the different archives, the surrounding politics, the confrontations with loss and grief, and the question of why fiction: why the novel, the short story, the hybrid forms, to tell or retell these histories.

Let me introduce our panelists today:

Kim Coleman Foote is the author of Coleman Hill, a novel inspired by her family's Great Migration experience. She has received writing fellowships from the NEA, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Center for Fiction, and NYFA, and holds an MFA in creative writing from Chicago State University.

Maisy Card is the author of the novel These Ghosts are Family, which won an American Book Award, the 2021 OCM Bocas Prize in fiction and was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Novel, The Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, and the LA Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction.

Shilpi Suneja was born in India. She is the author of the novel, House of Caravans. Her writing has been supported by a National Endowment for the Arts literature fellowship, a Massachusetts Cultural Council fellowship, and a Grub Street Novel Incubator scholarship.
To get us grounded, would each of you briefly introduce your book?

Participant Initial Remarks: Brief description of the panelists’ books to be discussed

Kim Coleman Foote

- *Coleman Hill* is a multigenerational multivoiced novel inspired by my family’s Great Migration journey from Florida and Alabama to New Jersey, and takes place from 1916 to the 1980s.

Maisy Card

- *These Ghosts Are Family* is a Jamaican family saga.
- It begins with the revelation of a secret by the family patriarch in present-day Harlem.
- The novel expands to explore how family secrets, particularly those fueled by slavery and a legacy of white supremacy, have impacted the members of the Paisley family across generations.

Shilpi Suneja

- Moving back and forth from the tumultuous years surrounding the Partition of India to the era of renewed global sectarianism following 9/11, *House of Caravans* portrays a family and nations divided by the living legacy of colonialism.

Moderator Questions:

1. Why do you consider that history to be marginalized, and why was it important to write about it?

   Kim:
   - Black stories tend to not be seen as part of official American history.
AWP24 Event Outline

- Histories that do incorporate African Americans tend to focus on people who made significant achievements. My family did not; they for the most part was working class/poor and “uneducated.”
- Great Migration stories prioritize experiences in the big Northern cities; mine is set in the New Jersey suburbs.

**Maisy:**
- Caribbean history is rarely taught in American schools.
- Americans and sometimes Jamaicans themselves often paint Jamaica as a multiracial utopia.
- When I began writing, I was familiar with a handful of novels that also explored Jamaican migration to the U.S. in fiction (there are many more now), but I wanted to focus on Jamaicans in U.S. as opposed to England.

**Shilpi:**
- This is my family's story, my grandfather migrated from Pakistan to India on the eve of independence and Partition. His leaving behind everything he owned and everyone he knew, his severance from a whole way of life informed his children's and his children's children's lives. And yet we did not talk about it, so I needed to talk about it. I chose the medium of the novel because fiction gives you a prototype in which you can talk about emotional truths, unfiltered.

2. **How did you get started, what set the course, and why did you choose fiction?**

**Kim:**
- I was fascinated by my family’s lives since hearing stories about them as a little girl.
- I wanted to examine the roots of major rifts and traumas within my family and show how the North wasn’t exactly the Promised Land for black folks.
- Fiction allowed me to build a more fully fleshed narrative from the anecdotes and scant details I had about my family members.

**Maisy:**
- The death and illness of elders in my family.
AWP24 Event Outline

- Used fiction as a way to fill the void left by the loss of ancestral knowledge.
- Other novels by Caribbean authors that explored family secrets, particularly WHITE TEETH by Zadie Smith and THE DEW BREAKER by Edwidge Danticat.

Shilpi:
- The history and the cultural and social legacy of the Partition of 1947—when British colonial rule ended in South Asia and the subcontinent was split into India and Pakistan—is suppressed in official accounts, replaced by a celebratory effusion for independence. Why pause to think about the one million killed and thirteen million displaced? Because—as is the case right now with the genocide in Gaza—colonialism and the splitting of peoples and lands have horrid consequences. If we don't pause to study and mourn these legacies we will keep on forgetting and repeating these mistakes.

3. What were some of your challenges recreating this history (e.g., research, stereotypes, etc.)?

Kim:
- Gaps in my research and my desire to present as much of the “truth” as possible.
- Concerns about depicting black trauma in balanced and nuanced ways.
- Concerns about my family’s reaction.

Maisy:
- Spent a lot of time grappling with the fear of being inauthentic, which lead to too much research.
- Got lost down a lot of research rabbit holes that acted as a form of procrastination.
- While researching, I found no first-hand accounts written or dictated by Jamaican slaves. Had to rely on accounts and documents produced by slaveowners or white people during that time.

Shilpi:
The biggest challenge was trying to write about a vast chunk of time—from the 1940s to 2001. What kind of a structure would allow for that scope? How to chart the emotional growth of the characters in a believable way?

4. **Looking back post-publication, is there anything you would have done differently?**

**Kim:**
- No; I did the best I could with the information at my disposal.
- If I had time, though, I would have corrected some minor factual errors and would have incorporated an anecdote I heard too late about one of the characters.

**Maisy:**
- Hadn't been able to trace my family's history beyond a few generations at the time of writing, but since then I've been able to go back to my sixth great-grandmother. If I had known what I know now, I would have incorporated more of the actual family secrets I've discovered since.
- It feels like so many characters' stories could be continued; since publishing, I've written related short stories that explore different characters in the novel.

**Shilpi:**
- Not really. I would have tried to arrive at the final draft a lot faster, but I don't know how.

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**Q&A with the audience**

We have a few minutes left to take any questions from you.