

The Reporter's Notebook

By Ann Kristine Estaris

About

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The collection of works featured in "The Reporter's Notebook" was created for & curated from various Journalism+Design courseworks.

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New York's New World's Fair

October 24, 2019



On most Saturday nights, from April to October, hordes of people gather at The New York Hall Of Science in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park for the Queens Night Market. The smell of barbecue and the sight of smoke fading up into the bright street lights are the first things patrons notice upon passing the Unisphere and the metal gates that enclose the event.

The open-air event features seventy-five vendors hailing from various parts of the tri-state area, each selling food or other merchandise that was influenced by or represented their cultural heritage, all “celebrating the rich cultural diversity and heritage of NYC and Queens”.

John Wang, the founder of the event, says, “the goal of the Queens Night Market is to create NYC's most affordable, welcoming, and diverse community event or space.” A \$6 maximum for each food item, with limited exceptions, seems to set the Queens Night Market apart from other food-centric events, such as Smorgasburg in Brooklyn or the New York Times Food Festival that occurred earlier this month in Manhattan. Wang says, “affordability is the greatest equalizer, and absolutely critical to welcoming all people, regardless of background, ethnicity, or income level.”

Not only is affordability a driving factor behind the event's success, but the type of food that is offered plays a large role, as well. “We try to curate stories more than we curate food... We're looking to feature traditional foods, made by the people who grew up eating it. That's really to say that we

don't curate Instagrammable food or novel concepts that will probably go viral, but doesn't have a traditional aspect that we're trying to highlight,” says Wang.



At a stand called Grilla in Manila, Rachel Tanglao-Aquitania, one patron at the night market, says, “I was able to find some traditional Filipino foods that my mom always made for me while growing up like lumpia, pancit, and diniguan so it makes me feel like I'm at home and gives a nostalgic feeling.”

For the vendors at the event, while tradition and nostalgia are important factors that they base their dishes around, they also believe in making these foods accessible for everyone. Jessica Spiegel is the co-owner of Joon, a stand that focuses on Persian stews and crispy rice, or tahdig. “For my partner Amir, who grew up in Iran, this is his ultimate comfort food because this is what he grew up eating, and the food that he has with his family. This is the food that he craves and loves the most. For me, I grew up in Florida, and had never had Persian food until I met Amir 10 years ago. For me our food is comforting in a different way that I crave it not because I grew up with it, but because it's something that fills me up in a way that means I'm with family, and because it's delicious,” she says.

“There is a large variety of foods and cultures in one place, so I would say that the Queens Night Market offers a lot of diversity. It's very important for people to broaden their horizons and expose themselves to cultures that are different from their own, which they can do here,” says Tanglao-Aquitania.

Despite living under an administration that promotes anti-immigrant policies, food-centric events like the Queens Night Market highlight the positive intersection between food, culture, and community.



A 2019 YouGov survey that looked at how Americans and members of seven European countries perceived immigration, “the most commonly agreed benefit of immigration has been better food,” with 50% of Americans saying food “has benefited from immigration in the country.” The other 50% should visit the Queens Night Market.

“In most cases, I think our vendors are probably cooking what is ‘comfort food’ for them,” said Wang, “but that might be novel or exotic to others. That’s kind of the point of the Queens Night Market, to give people a chance to experience and learn things from others, to broaden one’s cultural horizons.”

With new food-focused events springing up throughout the boroughs each week, the location for the Queens Night Market is by no means coincidental. “Queens is a natural fit and also symbolic in many ways,” says Wang, “By some accounts, Queens is the most diverse urban area in the world, which fits our mission perfectly.”

Theater Review: “The Minutes” by Tracy Letts

February 29, 2020

Is it possible to make a mundane town council meeting in small-town America compelling? In the small town of Big Cherry, maybe so. From debates about parking spaces to presentations on the town’s water fountain, much of what unfolds in “The Minutes” is tedious, yet familiar—somewhat predictable, even—and will have you laughing along at first, then questioning your complicity.

“The Minutes” is the most recent work by playwright and actor, Tracy Letts, who also stars in this play about politics and power. A Steppenwolf production directed by Anna D. Shapiro, the one-act show first premiered at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theater in 2017 before moving to Broadway in late February 2020.

The entirety of the 90-minute dark comedy takes place on a stormy fourth Thursday of November in the drab, dark-colored meeting room of Big Cherry’s city council, designed by David Zinn. With conceivable characters like the bright and inquisitive town newbie, Mr. Peel (played by Armie Hammer), the ever-confused and aptly named Mr. Oldfield (played by Austin Pendleton), the arrogant and boisterous Mr. Breeding (played by Cliff Chamberlain) and the affable Mayor Superba (played by Tracy Letts), “The Minutes” offers an accurate depiction of American small-town politics in its simplest, and perhaps most monotonous, form.

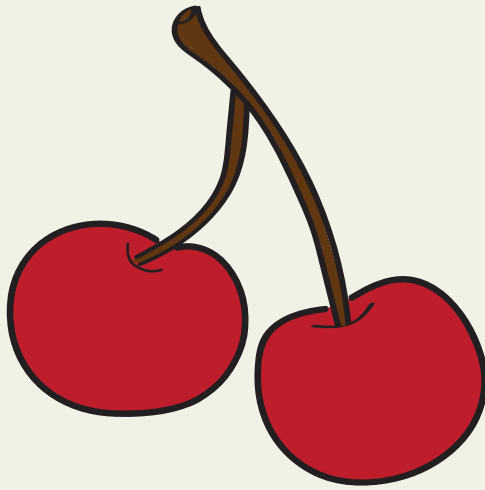
While Letts sought out to make audiences laugh with the civics small-talk in “The Minutes”, he also attempted to comment on a more extensive issue about the history of small towns like Big Cherry. As the ten local council members dutifully re-enact the history of Big Cherry, it’s normal to once again be hit by a feeling of familiarity. The tale is one similar to those many have previously heard of or read about in textbooks; the same “true” stories we might have been taught to accept with ease in elementary or high school history classes. In a conversation with Mr. Peel, Mayor Superba concludes, “History is a verb.” One main takeaway from the play is the notion that you can never win if you don’t play, as exhibited by other characters like the quiet and cagey Ms. Johnson (played by Jessie Mueller), the kooky Ms. Matz (played by Sally Murphy), and the chatty Ms. Innes (played by Blair Brown).

Once the humor began to diminish and the plot took a turn to more heavy-handed issues, the audience was audibly confused and uncomfortable. The laughter that once rang out throughout the Cort Theater turned into

incredulous questionings of “What did I just watch?” and “Did that just happen?” at the end of the play. Even after the play ended, murmurs of confusion in the staircases and corridors of the theater lingered, but perhaps that works in Letts’ favor as “Confusion is the first step toward clarity,” as the saying goes.

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While not intentional, a play about power (and corruption and all other characteristics of politics) is fitting when considering the current administration. While Letts’ play is devoid of all mentions of Trump, it’s difficult to understand his play without comparing it to the present-day reality. When someone is given power, regardless of who they are, they are able to control the narrative— what we see, how we see it. This is true in “The Minutes” as it invites us to question our history and the positions of power that are perpetuated in them.



The Search for Certainty Is Not So Certain

September 16, 2019

According to The Institute of International Education’s annual [Open Doors Report](#), there were 1,094,792 international students in the U.S. during the 2017-2018 school year. As the current administration has wavered with its policies about [nonimmigrant students and exchange visitors](#), international students studying at American colleges and universities are struggling to reap the benefits of their work during their time here.

Recent F.I.T. graduate, Annette Pramono, says, “I wish I knew all the options of other visas and how limited the job opportunities for international students was upon graduation.” The reality for international students who seek employment during the school year and after graduation is that they must encounter several obstacles before they are cleared to legally work in the U.S.

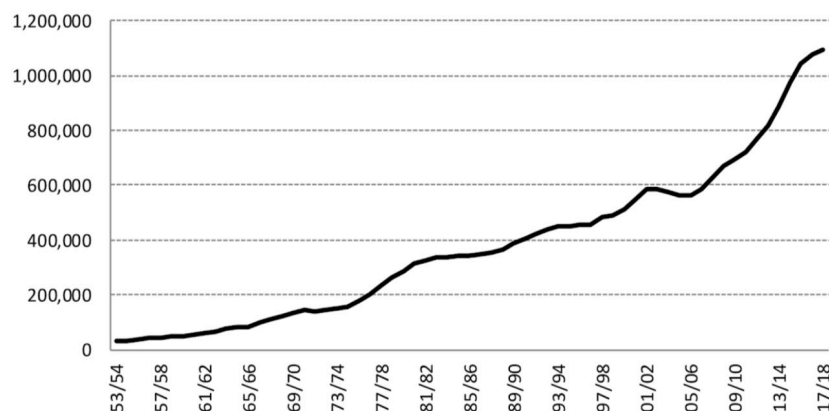
The 23-year-old, Jakarta native is a Fashion Business Management major who is currently on OPT, or [Optional Practical Training](#), which she applied for after her F-1 Visa expired following her graduation this past Spring. “We have that 90 day limit to find a job or we won’t be able to use our OPT but for me... all of my friends have been getting jobs even before they graduated, but I can’t apply before I get my work authorization card, so it’s a bit frustrating,” she says.

While two forms of OPT exist for undergrad and graduate students, respectively, the temporary employment is only valid for 12 months and must be related to a student’s field of study. For STEM students, an exception permits eligibility for a 24 month OPT extension. But when a student’s OPT expires, they are once again left with [limited options](#) which include applying for other visas, returning to school, or returning home.

Abyana Fardeena is a 21-year old Saint John’s University student who hails from Dhaka, Bangladesh. She says, “I am always at a disadvantage when it comes to applying for jobs as an international student because of the visa restrictions. There are only a handful of companies who are willing to take or sponsor international students because sponsorship is expensive therefore I really need to be good at what I do. This limits a lot of opportunities.”

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TRENDS*

In 2017/18, the number of international students in the U.S. increased by 1.5% to 1,094,792 students.



Source: The Institute of International Education, Open Doors 2018 "Fast Facts"

According to a [Pew Research Center analysis](#), "In 2017, a record 276,500 foreign graduates received work permits under the OPT program... However, growth has slowed considerably: The number of enrollees grew by 8% in 2017, compared with 34% in 2016." While the analysis found that the decline was due to fewer students being enrolled in STEM fields in 2017, it also noted that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services placed restrictions on the OPT program's regulations.

Fardeena is a Computer Science major with a concentration in Business Administration. She says, "I do wish more people knew about what we deal with. When I tell people about my restrictions, most of them sympathize. I am not seeking sympathy. I am seeking freedom in terms of career and passion."

When asked if she has to compromise or sacrifice anything to achieve her goals, Fardeena says, "Yes, a lot. Take the upcoming Career Fair for example. Over 80 plus companies are coming to recruit students from campus. However, I am only eligible to apply for only one internship position due to my visa restrictions... The only one company I found is taking people for 'Data Analytics', not even Data Science, on campus. I was very interested to apply for an internship for a Finance company, since it is my second option. I signed up for their information session however, I did

not attend because they mentioned in one of their internship postings that they are not providing work authorization."

For many international students, OPT is only the beginning. While options may vary for international students who seek employment after graduation, some wish they had more help in planning post-grad life. Pramono, who is currently employed at Lord and Taylor, says, "I wish I knew how hard it is to stay here, so I could've prepared myself in job searching and I wish I had help finding other possibilities to stay... or how to find a job post-grad that sponsors."

Op-ed: Like Trump's Letter to Erdogan, America's Reputation is Discarded

October 28, 2019

“Don’t be a tough guy. Don’t be a fool!” wrote President Donald Trump, in a [letter](#) to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on October 9. Given the current situation with Turkey, Syria and the Kurds, President Trump would do well to take his own (albeit, oversimplified) advice. Following his [decision](#) to pull American troops out of Syria, President Trump has received immense backlash from both sides of the political spectrum—and rightly so. The newest directive allows for a Turkish military offensive to arise in northeastern Syria which mainly targets the Kurds living in the region because, as Trump [said](#) to reporters at the White House on Monday, “We never agreed to protect the Kurds for the rest of their lives.”

Regardless of any formal or informal agreements made between the U.S. and the Kurds, Kurdish troops fought tirelessly alongside the American military since 2015, in a bid to end the terrorism caused by ISIS. But the U.S. has now left the Kurds in the hands of Turkish forces, and they have felt the fresh sting of American betrayal like that of an unprecedented slap in the face.

President Trump firmly believes that his solution is “much better for humanity,” even asking, “Where’s the agreement that we have to stay in Middle East for [the] rest of civilization?” In actuality, it’s evident that his newest order continues to mar humanity. Internally displaced Syrian Kurds are forced to flee from persecution, with a [report](#) by the UN Refugee Agency writing that “teams on the ground [in Iraq] report that...more than 7,100 [Syrian refugees] have arrived since last Monday.” The refugee crisis, an on-going issue in Syria, has been exacerbated by this new decision.

In a [report](#) by ABC News, one Syrian woman named Salwa Hanna tells of her experience since the Turkish invasion, “For a whole year the Turks threatened us,’ Hanna said. ‘I kept saying we should escape, because with the Turks there is no security. But my husband always said there are Americans, Britain, France, and they won’t abandon us.’ And then, just like that, the Americans left, and her family’s fearful flight resumed.” This has become the stark reality for millions of civilians caught in the crossfire.

This act of betrayal and abandonment has not only impacted Kurds in northeastern Syria, but Americans who have fought alongside Kurdish fighters, as well. Many American soldiers share sentiments of remorse at the directions to abandon their Kurdish allies. In a New York Times [inter-view](#) with American fighters, the writers detail that “The American-Kurdish military alliance against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq ‘began with us helping them,’ said Peter W. Galbraith, the former American diplomat who has for years also been a senior adviser to the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq. ‘But by the end, it was them helping us. They are the ones who recovered the territory that ISIS had taken.’ All the work that the American-Kurdish military alliance has done to punish ISIS has now been rescinded.

To pull American troops from northeastern Syria is to abruptly end our alliance with the Kurds. To pull American troops from northeastern Syria is to disrespect the 11,000 Kurdish soldiers who [fought terrorism](#) “under U.S. direction against ISIS”. To pull American troops from northeastern Syria is to depict the U.S. as a weak nation, it is to diminish our reputation as the beacon of democracy, freedom, and hope that other nations once looked to us for. We are turning a blind eye to the millions of civilians that are now endangered because of one capricious act made by the man in the Oval Office. Although we have become masters of apathy to past issues, this subject has incited indignation from even Trump’s most loyal supporters.

President Trump [believes](#) that “The Kurds are much safer right now... the Kurds know how to fight. And as I said they’re not angels, they’re not angels.” Americans are certainly not angels, either, Mr. President, and they (including yourself) should certainly not be focusing on spiritual beings when the violence occurring on the ground is solely physical.

The Kurds who are skilled in fighting, whom Trump speaks of, are only a portion of those being impacted by the Turkish offensive. What about the innocent civilians who are fleeing from Turkish aggression, Mr. President? What about the men, the women, and the children who don’t know how or don’t want to fight? As the violence ensues in northeastern Syria, “[teams](#) from UNHCR... have assisted some 31,800 people,” according to a report by the U.N. Refugee Agency. These numbers will continue to grow. The result of this arbitrary act has left civilians killed, others displaced, and allowed for detained ISIS members and their families to escape, posing untold threats of terrorist violence in the Middle East, as well as Western cities. There is no reset button that will undo the damage here.

Film Review: *The Farewell* (2019)

Written & directed by Lulu Wang

April 22, 2019

Cultural assimilation compels people to discover and define two, distinct poles of the human condition: who you are and who you are expected to be. There is a constant battle between the two, especially as this process comes with a behavioral tendency to lie, to both yourself and to your loved ones, as a means of protection. But when (if ever) does lying become unethical?

This is the heart of Lulu Wang's stirring and clever film, *The Farewell*. "Based on an actual lie," it explores the many facets of duality— of cultural and emotional clashes, and of the struggle between individualism and family. The real-life lie that sits at the center of the film was first described by the writer-director herself in a [2016 episode of This American Life](#) and much of the film's plot is lent from Wang and her relatives' own experience with—or perhaps, expertise in— lying (the film's title is *Don't Tell Her in Mandarin*).

The saying goes, "Every family has secrets," but *The Farewell* offers a whole new meaning to the phrase. The secret here is that the family matriarch, Nai Nai (Zhao Shuzhen), is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and given only months to live. Everyone but Nai Nai knows of the diagnosis, including her Americanized granddaughter, Billi (Awkwafina, *Crazy Rich Asians*), and, despite her parents' pleas to stay in New York while they return home, she arrives at her grandmother's apartment in Changchun, China days later. To the rest of her family, Billi's visit is conditional, as the presumed purpose of everyone's trip is her cousin's impromptu wedding. In actuality, the wedding is a cover-up for a farewell party of sorts; it is a chance for the family to reconnect with each other after 25 years away from home, in order to pay their respects to a dying loved one.

What follows is a constant culture clash, a look into the complexities of family dynamics, and some wedding planning. Throughout its entirety, Nai Nai is lively and warm, juxtaposing other members of the family that epitomize anxiety and caution. "Chinese people have a saying. When people get cancer, they die. It's not the cancer that kills them, it's the fear," says Billi's mother (Diana Lin). This fear slowly affects each character—everyone except Nai Nai— because, "In the East, a person's life is part of a whole. Family. Society," and it is no coincidence that this particular family must return

home, to the East, in order for this concept to truly come to life.

In this story, there is no right or perfect way to express (or suppress) the love you have for your family. With Wang's direction, it's clear that everyone's perspective matters here. This can be seen in carefully crafted scenes where the actors skillfully express their unspoken feelings. It is evident as Hao Hao (Han Chen) refrains himself from crying at the dinner table following a tender exchange with his grandmother who he hasn't seen in years, it plays out during a conversation between Billi's mother and Little Nai Nai (Hong Lu) at the wedding that reveals just how much people sacrifice for family, and it can be seen as Billi's uncle (Yongbo Jiang) gives a spontaneous, heart-wrenching tribute to his mother at the wedding.

Without overwhelming viewers, Wang expertly balances hardships and humor, highlighting the intricacies of humanity by finding joy in some of life's darkest moments. With an ensemble cast, the story unfolds beautifully and transcends beyond any tired clichés or cultural stereotypes expected of a family comedy film.

Before Billi returns to New York, Nai Nai tells her, "Where your thoughts go, your body follows," as the film confronts us with the complexities of family life, of what it means to be human and to care for others. Rooted in a compelling personal narrative and cultural particularity, *The Farewell* succeeds in its ability to be universally resonant and accessible, leaving us with a sense of familiarity and catharsis.

