

Event: “Jefferson Humanities Forum: Yaa Gyasi”

Three Words: Pick three words that describe your experience of an Asano event and describe what inspired the choices. What other parts of your life (personal or professional) relate to the words you chose?

Symbolic, peripheral, expansive.

Yaa Gyasi, whose debut novel was written when she was only twenty-six, has already had multiple career milestones and her personal background had drawn me to this event. The first word that came to mind while I was listening to her speak was the word “symbolic.” Through the construction of her first novel, she had commented on the discovery of a way “to trace the line from the two places that she was ostensibly from and also removed from.” Her emphasis on being a hyphenated Ghanaian-American speaks to the need to integrate the two worlds that she was “from” in order to produce a narrative that was understandable, in which West African readers within the United States could situate themselves. As a young creative of color, the word “symbolic” has arisen for me whenever I have considered the aspects of myself that I have attempted to capture through my own artistic creations. In contrast to a defined, linear perspective of being Asian-American in the United States, my experience has encompassed almost everything which is not stereotypically “Asian.” I have related to the idea of occupying liminal spaces in multiple phases of my life. In Gyasi’s case, her experiences being seen as symbolic of the Ghanaian-American experience had made her consider the question of why she should be the one who had the privilege of writing this history. As a writer myself, I have often thought of how to portray the liminal spaces I have occupied, have considered the privilege of world-building and collating the different spaces to which I “belong.”

Consequently, the next word that I was reminded of during this event was the word “peripheral.” Gyasi commented on the notion of trans-generational trauma in relation to immigration to the United States, especially with respect to acculturation upon arrival to the U.S. She spoke of feeling as though she could not locate herself among the different identities with which she was associated. As a child, she had read the same novels that I had about the sense of displacement - *The House on Mango Street* and the *Interpreter of Maladies*. Similar to the experiences I had, she recognized literature as a form of place-finding, of situating what was not as readily situated for immigrants and first-generation Americans.

The last word I chose was “expansive.” Gyasi’s talk mentioned how black immigrants to the United States raising children who were born in the United States or brought to the United States at a very young age learned to consider their children’s viewpoints. As children of immigrants may quickly acquire knowledge about their new country that their parents realize much later, it brings an additional layer of complexity into this field of writing. Asking questions about characters means considering all of the things that may have formed them and shaped their mind. This final word I have chosen is one of the most empowering realizations I have had in my own personal life. Becoming open to new perspectives and combining multiple identities has contributed to my inquisitive nature and allowed me to understand the importance of asking questions.