



# THE WARRIOR KING AND OTHER STORIES

BY A NORA LONG

**B**egin when all the rest who left behind them/headlong death in battle or at sea/had long ago returned, while he alone still hungered/for home and wife.  
- *The Odyssey*

In Homer's *The Odyssey*, a returning veteran must undertake a massive journey, both literally and metaphorically, before he is able to return home from the war and rule his kingdom. Jonathan Shay, a doctor and clinical psychiatrist, wrote a pair of books (*Achilles in Vietnam*, and *Odysseus in America*) in which he uses *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to illustrate the psychological devastation of war on combat veterans by drawing parallels between Homer's soldiers and the Vietnam veterans he treats. "The questionable side of Odysseus' character, and how it came to be, is a thread that runs through this book," he writes in *Odysseus in America*. "I hope that the sensationalism attaching to crime will not distract the reader from those losses that never make headlines."

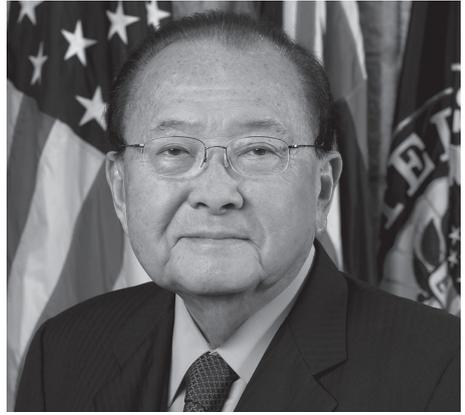
Odysseus is the clever king, robbed of his kingdom and his family for 10 years of war, and another 10 years of wandering home. He gets an epic poem, all to himself, and countless other works of art, never mind his supporting role in *The Iliad*. He is a Greek soldier,

but he is so vastly different from Achilles, or Agamemnon, or Menelaus – all Greek soldiers with their own countless appearances in art and culture. Each is flawed in his own ways, but each earns our compassion as dimensional characters (except for Agamemnon, maybe nobody likes that guy). They are visible as individuals and members of a culture we all learn about in school, and they lived 3,000 years ago (if at all).

In *Warrior Class*, Nathan casually draws a parallel between Odysseus and Julius, "You sailed across the wine-dark sea to seek Elysian Fields and now it's like you're just polishing the armor." While Julius's battles may have begun before Troy, the comparison may be more apt than Nathan intends.

**L**et no man holding scepter as a king/be thoughtful, mild, kindly, or virtuous;/let him be cruel, and practice evil ways - *The Odyssey*

"All politics is local," said former Massachusetts Congressman and Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, and truly, local politics is all. Accounting for over \$1.6 trillion in spending every year, J. Eric Oliver, Shang E. Ha and Zachary Callen argue in their book *Local Elections and the Politics of Small-Scale Democracy*, local



Left: Odysseus and Polyphemus, Arnold Brocklin, 1896. Above: Elaine Chao, 24th United States Secretary of Labor (2001-2009); Daniel Inouye, United States Senator of Hawaii (1963-2012), the President pro tempore of the United States Senate (2010 until his death in 2012) and the highest ranking Asian American in congressional history.

government has more direct impact on daily life than the federal government, despite the differences in visibility. “It tells us where we can live, how we can dress, what we can eat, and how we can act in both public and private places.” They go on to write that while national elections are more ideological in nature, local elections are more akin to traditional hiring practices. “In most circumstances, incumbents will be successful if they simply maintain a preexisting equilibrium between taxes and services,” they write, “and if they can avoid major scandals or faux pas.”

If a politician wants to move up in the world, managerial competence is not enough to gain the visibility to prove ideological interest to the larger electorate. Few are offered the kind of plum speaking opportunity a certain Illinois state senator had at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, one that would catapult him into the national spotlight and on the road to the White House, for example. We must be seen to be heard.

### **M**en hold me/formidable for guile in peace and war - *The Odyssey*

According to the Pew Research Center, Asian-Americans have the highest-income, are the best-educated, and represent the fastest-

growing racial group in the United States, all prime markers for a promising political career. However, as a recent *Boston Globe* article noted, “Nationwide, just 1 percent of all state legislators are Asian, even though Asians make up 5 percent of the national population.” In Massachusetts, the House has five Asian-American legislators and one in the Senate.

As Alex Wagner notes in *The Atlantic*, “Like nearly every other electoral subgroup in U.S. polling, ‘Asian’ is a label that masks the diversity among its peoples... [that] encompasses a vast array of cultures, languages, religions and histories.” The largest obstacle to political participation, she argues, may have to do with Asian invisibility. “Asians don’t necessarily think of themselves as ‘Asian,’” she writes. “Collective marginalization on its own can be a unifying force, but it assumes identification in a collective to begin with.” When the collective is externally imposed, identity becomes more complicated.

Jeff Yang noted in 2010 the coalescing geopolitical issue for a divisive election season was our relationship with China and how afraid we should be. Fear can be a useful political motivator, but it works both ways. He goes on to explain that “what makes the widespread

demonization of China and “the Chinese” so frightening to Asian Americans: The line between Asians on *that* side of the ocean and those on *this* side has always been blurry to those with a surplus of rage and a deficit of judgement.” The narrow story perpetuated by political rhetoric does very little to humanize a diverse group of individuals from a single country, let alone from the 47 other countries we could be implicating when we say “Asian.” And, when the national media does draw its attention to anyone, it is rarely celebratory.

Tom Huang wrote after the Virginia Tech shooting about the experience of seeing himself in the killer, identified as a Korean national. “He looks like me. I don’t mean that literally, of course. I mean in a cultural sense.” Concerns about other young men who “fit the description,” and might now be subject to racially-motivated backlash prompted President Roh Moo Hyun of South Korea to issue four public apologies at the time. The cultural narrative that springs up when an Asian face comes to public prominence as with Virginia Tech, or Wen Ho Lee [an American citizen who was falsely accused of espionage largely due to his Taiwanese background] is rooted in fear of the other – of a person who is more “Asian” than “American” and all the stereotypes rooted in those collective identities. Huang writes, “The danger of racial

identifiers, and racial stereotypes, is that they provide us with shortcuts to telling stories that turn out to be wrong.”

There are certainly alternative ways to see Odysseus’ story besides “clever king who gets lost.” He could be known as just an adulterer, a war criminal, or plain unlucky. But because Homer doesn’t take shortcuts in his story, we are afforded a compassionate window into a dimensional man and may even understand his choices. Because he is seen, he can be heard.

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