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Campus Commentary #4

Charles Yu, author of the novels *Interior Chinatown* and *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, wants young writers to know that they are intelligent. On the surface, this message seems straightforward. Obviously, a veteran author giving a popular lecture would aim to encourage his listeners. However, Yu's message is more complex than it seems, given the broader context of artificial intelligence. In his February 2026 lecture at Davidson College, Charles Yu used personal anecdotes to emphasize the importance of self-confidence, then tied this issue to the proliferation of AI in academic and creative spaces. Yu then asked audience members to consider the differences between computer and human intelligence in order to assure students of their own worth.

First, Charles Yu used his high school experience to illustrate the importance of positive self-perception for young people. Yu began by telling the audience about his career as a second-string mathlete. After failing a difficult math test, a young Yu wondered where his true talent lay. Detrimentally, he tied that question to his still-developing identity. If he was not a talented mathematician, then who was he? Yu included this story in his lecture to demonstrate the harmful effects of equating accomplishment with identity. He warned listeners that making the same mistake that he did in high school could have catastrophic effects on their self-esteem. Yu's choice to communicate this message through a relatable anecdote allowed him to connect with his audience. Personally, I felt a twinge of recognition as I listened. I could remember a time

when I had based my identity on success, so I understood exactly why Yu thought of this mindset as harmful. His story helped me to understand the facility with which young people lose their sense of self as well as the consequences that follow.

After touching on the importance of separating identity from achievement, Charles Yu went on to discuss how artificial intelligence has changed the writing and publishing industries. Somewhat bleakly, Yu admitted that becoming a successful writer may be more difficult now due to the proliferation of AI. Although this statement was disappointing, a more optimistic outlook may have come across as inauthentic. Yu's honesty established him as a trustworthy figure in the eyes of the audience.

Although Yu acknowledged that AI was a threat, he also assured the audience of AI's shortcomings. According to Yu, the "intelligence" of a computer is fundamentally different from human intelligence. Artificial intelligence cannot think, comprehend, or create in the same way as the human brain. For this reason, Yu took issue with the use of the word "intelligence" to describe new technology. He argued that the equation of a robot's ability to gather and spit out information with the unique process of thinking is a discredit to human ability. Yu encouraged his audience to distinguish between the two in hopes of improving their own self-image. While Yu's argument was uplifting and structurally sound, it also felt futile. I found myself wondering if classifying AI as something other than "intelligent" could truly lead somewhere productive, or if Yu was asking this semantic question for its own sake.

Charles Yu ended his speech by tying the limitations of artificial intelligence to his audience's self esteem. According to Yu, calling AI "intelligent" is not only inaccurate, but harmful. If people cannot believe in their own capability to learn and create, he argued, then they will be susceptible to a warped sense of identity and purpose. Yu's consideration of the AI

problem brought the audience back to his high school anecdote about losing his sense of self. Rather than think of themselves as computers faced with one task or another, humans must celebrate their unique ability to think and adapt in order to understand who they are.

After using a personal experience to demonstrate the fragility of people's self-perception, Charles Yu acknowledged a new challenge to self esteem in the form of artificial intelligence. He argued that reconceptualizing AI as something other than "intelligent" could act as a shield against the damaging effects of contemporary conversations about technology. As a young person working toward academic and professional success, I found Yu's message to be uplifting. Although the term "artificial intelligence" is most likely here to stay, I also wondered about the importance of the language we choose to describe evolving technology. All of a sudden, "mere semantics" seemed strikingly relevant.