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Volume IV (2011)

**Editor-in-Chief:** Professor David Palumbo-Liu

**Issue Editor:** Professor Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu

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In this issue of SJAAS we have collected seven papers written from various perspectives and academic disciplines on a broad range of engaging topics.

In **The Journey to Acceptance: Crossroads of Asian Culture and Queer Identity**, Aldric Ulep provides an insightful look at the pressures that arise from the intersections of Asian culture and queer culture. He contends that while coming out is especially difficult for the queer Asian child, parents too struggle in accepting their child's alternative sexuality in the context of ethnic traditions. Aldric focuses on the queer Asian child's coming out experience from the parents' perspective, analyzing the obstacles parents endure when their child, separated from them by cultural differences, comes out to them, and how the parents deal with those obstacles.

Victoria Yee writes of a traditional narrative of generational conflict between an American-born youth and her immigrant parent in **Chinese American Youth: Transforming Parents' Melancholia into Civic Engagement in Fae Mayenne Ng's *Bone***. She uses Freud's theory of unresolved grief as the framework to discuss the melancholic Asian American experience of being unable to fully obtain the American Dream. Victoria argues for the potential that second generation Chinese American young people have to transform their parents' melancholic experiences into civic affirmation and productivity.

Michael Tayag revisits a classic theme in his paper, **Great Expectations: The Negative Consequences and Policy Implications of the Asian American "Model Minority" Stereotype**. He shows that while the concept of the "model minority" seems to be a positive stereotype, it is not true of most Asians, and allows the burgeoning of pressure-related psychological problems in Asian American youth, as well as the educational neglect of millions of underachieving Asian American students. Michael advocates various ways for schools to give Asian American youth a fair chance at educational and socioeconomic success.

Kimberly Vu's essay, **International Hotel Reflection Piece on SROs**, looks inside the single resident occupancies of older Filipino men, who resided in the I-Hotel until 1981, when it was demolished by economic and political powers seeking to expand the financial districts of San Francisco. Kimberly's intimate reflections on life in the I-Hotel help us understand why the eviction of the men, also called manongs, drew such large crowds to their demonstrations and rallies and became a defining moment in Asian American history.

Johaina Crisostomo has given us a piece of her honors thesis in, **Turning Resilience into Art: Class Mobility and *Mestiza* Survivalism in Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels***. In her paper she writes of her homeland, the Philippines, through a character who is a

postcolonial subject working towards the decolonization of her mind. Johaina analyzes the characters's story of her two navels as her way of making explicit what has hitherto been left unspoken, forcing others to grapple with the contradictions and incongruities inherent in their Filipino heritage, and to realize the unfeasibility of absolute ways of thinking about identity.

**The Validity of Diagnosing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnamese American Refugees** deals with the disturbing problem of the stigmatization of PTSD in Vietnamese culture and communities. Tina Duong argues that doctors and psychiatrists need to provide culturally sensitive treatments in which patients are looked at as individuals who are not only tormented by their past experiences, but suffer from both somatic and acculturation problems. She advocates fighting stigmatization through education about mental illnesses and mental health services.

**In Constructing the "Chinaman:" Exploring Race and Masculinity in *Crash* and *Chickencoop Chinaman***, Holly Fetter compares and contrasts how *Crash* and *Chickencoop Chinaman* contribute to the construction of a generalized Asian identity in the American imagination. She argues that the former is an unproductive text because of the way in which it blatantly fails to validate Asian American narratives and notions of masculinity. Holly contends that while *Chickencoop Chinaman* is also extremely problematic, it is valuable in that it counters the silence and powerlessness of Asian Americans that remains unchallenged in texts like *Crash*.

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## The Journey to Acceptance: Crossroads of Asian Culture and Queer Identity

Aldric Ulep

*A gay man in his late 20s recalls his coming out experience to his Korean mother: “Coming out to my mother, I began to cry. She told me that nothing could be that bad, unless I had a fatal disease. So I told her I was gay. She didn’t cry. She asked me how long I had been impotent. I tried to explain that the problem wasn’t impotence, but that I wasn’t attracted to women. . . . Our discussion wasn’t very fruitful because I can’t articulate in Korean and she can’t articulate in English. She did, however, get across that I was rotting her soul and that she and Father would not be able to close their eyelids tightly when they died.” (Kim & Yu qtd. in Han 209)*

### INTRODUCTION: A CULTURAL DIVIDE

Many queer<sup>1</sup> children grow up confused and conflicted in a heterosexual world. In particular, queer Asian American youth face “racialized heterosexism in Asian American communities and queered racism in queer communities,” and so they feel a sense of exclusion from *both* communities (Kumashiro, “Reading Queer Asian” 68). In fact, because Asians<sup>2</sup> fear losing their family’s support and shaming their family, many queer Asians choose to remain in the closet, or keep their sexual identity a secret from their Asian parents. Given these pressures that arise from the intersections of Asian culture and queer culture, coming out is especially difficult for the queer Asian child; yet it should also be acknowledged that the parents’ role in accepting their child’s alternative sexuality while also recognizing ethnic traditions imposes a similar burden. A child’s queer identity, which conflicts with heteronormative Asian values, further deepens the already existing cultural divide between Asian immigrant parents and westernized Asian American children. This deepened divide makes it difficult for queer Asian American children and their parents to communicate with each other. In this paper I will focus on the queer Asian child’s coming out experience from the parents’ perspective. What obstacles do parents endure when their child, separated from them by cultural differences, comes out to them, and how do the parents deal with those obstacles?

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms “queer” and “alternative sexualities” to refer to gay and lesbian for convenience and conciseness. I do not discuss bisexual children because I feel the issue of bisexuality introduces a different dynamic—namely, that the parent might hope and push the child to choose a long-lasting heteronormative relationship. I also do not discuss transgender children because of a different sort of friction between Asian culture and gender issues, like the *bakla* culture.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “Asian” to refer to the Eastern and Southeastern countries of the continent. Throughout this paper, I namely use examples of families hailing from Korea, China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines. I justify this grouping by asserting the commonalities in the family structure, which function as collectivist societies and share heteronormative familial ideologies.

The juxtaposition of the immigrant parents' traditional Asian values with the second-generation Asian American child's queer identity introduces a cultural divide between the child and the traditional Asian parent. Furthermore, working under the crossroads of these interactions, it will prove difficult not only for the child to come out to his parents, but for the parents to discuss this alternative sexuality with the child and reconcile Asian heteronormative traditions with Asian familial values. Familial and cultural ideologies embedded in the Asian culture essentially conflict with a gay American identity. However, despite this cultural divide between an Asian immigrant parent and a queer Asian American child, Asian American parents *themselves* ultimately decide whether to adhere to heteronormative Asian traditions or respect the alternative sexuality of their child. They are not dictated by Asian culture to reject their children—they have the freedom to make the decision about caring for their children. While heteronormative Asian values may govern what is an acceptable sexuality, I contend that Asian familial values of interdependence often take priority, helping the Asian parents to accept the children's alternative sexualities.

### ASIAN COLLECTIVIST CULTURE

Asians place much importance on the family, which acts as a fundamental support group. Shinhee Han, a Korean American clinical social worker at Columbia University, asserts that Asian communities traditionally function as collectivist societies (208). Han states that in a collectivist society, “the extended family is the central unit and an individual's sense of self is intrinsically interwoven with it” (208). Essentially, the family is the core focus, and the importance of the family is stressed above the importance of the individual. This collectivist mindset prevails in most Asian cultures, especially in East Asian and Southeast Asian countries (Mao, McCormick and de Ven 420). Leticia Wiley, a Filipino mother of a lesbian daughter, sums up this point in a focus group discussion:

We were told we didn't live for ourselves only, we lived for the family. If we do good, the family gains honor and pride; if we do badly, well, that reflects on the family as well. So this was, in a way, a form of pressure because you could not be a failure on your own if you did something that society disapproved of—that meant that your parents and your brothers and sisters were also affected by what you did, and I think that is more true of Asians than Americans who, you know, judge themselves more as individuals. (*Coming Out, Coming Home*)

Collectivist societies usually encourage “saving face,” or maintaining a good self-image; pleasing the family supersedes any individual ambitions (Han 209). Triandis adds that “in collectivist cultures, group goals are generally valued above personal goals and group identity is more salient than individual identity, so that individuals are more likely to subordinate their personal interest to enhance the collective interests of in-groups” (qtd. in Mao, McCormick and de Ven 420). This collectivist focus on thriving in groups in Asian culture, in fact, suppresses individuality, discouraging any pursuit of self-interest that is detrimental to the interest of the group.

Because collectivists highly value group identity, they usually encounter difficulty when trying to reconcile multiple group identities with clashing ideologies (Chen qtd. in

Mao, McCormick and de Ven 420). Note that this collectivist culture does not only shift the focus from individual pursuits to group interests, but that the collectivist culture stresses loyalty to the group over loyalty to other groups whose ideals do not match up with their own, e.g. heteronormative Asian familial values and American queer culture. This connects to the previous point made about suppressing pursuit of self-interest in order to adhere to group ideals, making it difficult for one to choose between conflicting ideals of different groups.

However, queer Asians do not immediately reject their Asian identity in favor of a queer identity; in fact, they are fond of collectivist values. Brad, a participant in a focus group centered on Asian men with recent homosexual behavior, comments on the feeling of integration into the central family unit: “I think Asian culture is so important that it makes you feel you belong to a group. The sense of belonging to family is significant. You can still be independent. But having a family means that you have something to back you up. You feel a lot stronger [about] which way you are heading to” (Mao, McCormick and de Ven 423). This highlights that a significant benefit of collectivist societies lies within the sense of interdependence within the family.

Moreover, the family provides a web of support on which the individual may always rely. Desmond Kwok, a gay Chinese Canadian high school student, explains that his fellow Chinese gang members (unaffiliated with homosexuality) provided him protection at school against harassment based on his sexual orientation:

They always said they’d have my back, and if they see me being gay as creating a problem, people would always be there for me. Because that’s one thing gangs push, like if there is something bugging you, they have to be there. Because it’s like a family, it works like a family [. . .]. (Varney 100)

This Chinese gang functions as a collectivist group. Gang membership afforded Desmond both a “sense of belonging and protection” (Varney 100). Loyalty to the ideology of interdependence in the collectivist culture superseded the individualist aspect of Desmond’s alternative sexuality. In a sense, this phenomenon emulates Asian collectivist culture. Asians traditionally value adherence to the Asian community’s heteronormative ideals over the individual’s queer identity. However, most Asian parents will protect their queer children because they are a part of the family and especially in a collectivist community, the group is cherished.

### **BETRAYAL OF SELF: ASIAN FAMILIAL EXPECTATIONS**

Because of this cultural pressure to put the family first, queer Asian children often choose to hide their sexuality from their parents in fear of betraying the central family unit, the focus of a collectivist society. Generally, Asian parents have a set of expectations—specific roles that each child is supposed to follow. For example, the first-born Filipino daughter is obligated to “take care of the family, and get married and have kids” (Nishioka para 9). In general, Asian sons are generally responsible to dutifully “continue the family lineage and expand the family unit” (Han 209). Betrayal of the

family by forgoing responsibilities would potentially result in the loss of that support network that the child has comfortably relied on since birth.

Indeed, Asian immigrant parents condition their children to grow up by the traditional Asian values of “getting married, having children, and passing down the family name” (Kumashiro, “Supplementing normalcy and otherness” 502). Although this is a traditional view, a 2007 Thai film dealing with homosexuality and familial relationships demonstrates that this view continues to modern times. In this film, *The Love of Siam*, Tong is a gay teenage boy who’s been having a relationship with Mew, another gay teenage boy. Tong’s mother confronts Mew about their secret, illicit relationship and bids him to end it: “When Tong grows up, after he graduates, he has to get a job, find a good wife, and have a happy family. I don’t want him to take a path that is not right for him.” Tong’s mother clearly dictates what she wants her son’s future to be, wishing for an ideal future for her only son. Many Asian parents also sympathize with this sentiment. Maria Santos, a Filipina immigrant, had a similar reaction when her daughter came out to her: “I wanted it to change. I had the dream, that kids go to college, get married and have kids” (Hom 43). These parents desire what they believe is best for their child, and they push their children to achieve their expectations for their own good.

As a result of these expectations, children definitely feel laden with this pressure to lead the life of an ideal Asian. In *Coming Out, Coming Home*, a documentary chronicling the focus group discussions of Asian American families’ sentiments toward alternative sexualities, Daniel Bao, a gay Chinese-American, shares in an interview that there exists a “Chinese pressure to get married and have children and sort of lead a nice life so your parents could show you off.” The Asian parents do not feel like they are pressuring their child into doing anything, this is the way they themselves were raised and conditioned in Asia: their *own* parents instilled innate familial values, deeply ingrained in their beliefs and the Asian tradition.

### UNSPOKEN LOVE, UNSPOKEN SEXUALITIES

Asian parents traditionally express love for their children in indirect ways. They show their love by working undesirable jobs for low pay, by being thrifty to save money for college, and by nagging their children to do better in school so that they could have a better life (Mei para 3). Tim, a gay Chinese-American blogger, agrees and adds that his family always tacitly understands that his parents loved him and his siblings, even if he has never personally heard “I love you” in either Chinese or English (para 3). This implicit, unspoken love depends on the showing of love through actions.

In fact, in a similar fashion, issues pertaining to sexuality are seldom discussed in the family. In her essay “Stories from the Homefront,” Alice Hom, an educator who researches on the intersections of race and sexuality, shares the viewpoints and reactions of Asian American parents concerning their queer children. She states that despite its persistence as an important part of one’s life, sexuality is “an issue rarely or never discussed amongst Asian families” (37). “Our culture usually treats the subject of homosexuality with the tried and true method of silence. In our family, like others, this silence meant ignorance” says Harold Kameya (“Family and Coming Out Issues” para 5), a Japanese father of a lesbian daughter. He acknowledges that there exists a tacit

agreement between parents and children in Asian families to generally treat the topic of sexuality as taboo, whether it is heterosexuality or an alternative sexuality.

The avoidance of the topic of sexuality presents a more general concern: the parents' refusal to acknowledge a growing child as a sexual being—though the factor of traditional Asian heteronormative customs cannot be ignored. The Asian culture does not permit direct expression of sexual language and behavior, regardless of sexual orientation (Liu and Chan qtd. in Han 209); in fact, Asian cultures traditionally confine all sexual expression to the private realm (Kumashiro, "Reading Queer Asian" 64). Alexander Hong, a gay Korean, makes a fine point by blatantly stating the following: "Frankly, if I were straight, I *still* wouldn't discuss my sexual life with my parents. In most Asian families, especially ones in which the parents have emigrated from Asia, sex is one subject that is just not to be discussed" (110). In Asian culture, not only discussions about sexuality are taboo, but all discussions about sex are forbidden.

In an ethnic culture which tends to ignore any type of discussion about sex or sexuality, how do parents and children even begin to discuss an alternative sexuality? Queer children must first bypass this inherent prohibition on the discussion topic of alternative sexualities, making it difficult for them to disclose their sexual orientation to their parents (Han 209). Similarly, Asian parents of a queer child will find that Asian familial and cultural taboos on the issue of sexuality make it difficult to be open to a queer child's coming out. This taboo on the topic of sexuality is one of many problems that Asian parents face in discussing sexuality with their child.

### LANGUAGE BARRIERS

On a related note, it is rarely acknowledged that the "coming out" process is not only difficult for the child but for the parents as well. In particular, coming out to immigrant parents can prove difficult because of the language barrier between an American-raised child and Asian-raised parents with low English proficiencies. A term may not exist in the parent's language to satisfyingly explain the child's situation (Hom 40). A Filipino mother of a lesbian recalls her daughter's coming out: "That was the first time I heard the word lesbian, but I knew what it meant. Like the tomboy" (43). The very act of coming out is made difficult when the parent cannot understand the child's usage of queer technical jargon, or the explicit difference between gender and sexual orientation that's ambiguous in other languages.

Because gender and sexual orientation are not properly distinguishable in all languages, Asian parents may equate queerness with a desire to become the opposite sex. Connie S. Chan interviewed 95 Asian parents of gay children and found that

For the most part the interviewees, aware of gays and lesbians during their growing up years, associated gender role reversals with gays and lesbians. The men were feminine and the women looked male or tomboy with the women couples in a butch-femme type relationship. The belief and experiences with lesbians and gay men who dress and act in opposite gender roles serve as the backdrop of what to compare their children with when faced with their coming out. (Hom 40)

The immigrant parents related homosexuality with experiences of their personal encounters with members of the queer community back in Asia. These impressions of Asian homosexuality did not always directly relate to their American-raised child, confusing the parents. Asian parents may have knowledge of same-sex attractions, but the concept of “gay identity” is a Western concept (Han 210). Hom notices that the Asian parents usually recognized an upset of a gender norm as a red flag for homosexual behavior (40). This is the way the parents were conditioned while growing up in Asia. Alternative sexualities are immediately associated with reversals of the gender norm, upsetting the heteronormative Asian tradition.

### PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN QUEER CULTURE

Although Hom notes that Asian parents “deal with internalized homophobia” (43), I argue that what is instilled in these parents is not homophobia, but rather, a sense of unshakable heteronormative values. They are conditioned to view homosexuality as negative because homosexuality was associated with assimilation to Western culture. In fact, for many Asian immigrants, “queers were denigrated, at least in part, *because* [queers] were White. . . . only Whites were supposed to be queer; if you were an Asian American who was queer, you were not a real Asian, you were more White than Asian, you had the ‘white disease’” (qtd. in Kumashiro, “Supplementing normalcy and otherness” 503). “It’s a white disease” is commonly associated with the act of “coming out” in an Asian American context (Hom 39). The Asian community’s prescription of the word “disease” suggests negative connotation to the act of “coming out” itself. This does not only harm the child, who is discouraged from identifying with being queer, but this affects the Asian parents’ perceptions of being queer.

I have discussed that the language barrier usually makes the coming out process more difficult. However, when the opportunity does present itself, some Asian children prefer to come out to their parents in their native language because they want to emphasize that possessing an alternative sexuality is not a Western byproduct (“Family and Coming Out Issues”). Parents often blame “assimilation and acculturation in a western context” if their child is queer (Hom 39). If the parents associate queer culture with American culture, then the Asian parents feel that they are the ones to blame for “imposing” a queer sexuality onto them by emigrating and assimilating into American culture.

### PERCEPTIONS AS PARENTS

Especially from the viewpoint of a parent, Asian parents are concerned about what a homosexual lifestyle entails for their child. Fung Bao, a Chinese mother of a gay son, voices her concern: “I’ve heard things about what homosexuality was, but it’s all negative. People are saying bad things about them, they’re not treated well, they are being discriminated—it’s all negative” (*Coming Out, Coming Home*). Asian immigrant parents can relate to this discrimination by comparing their child’s assimilation into a heteronormative world with their own assimilation into a Western world. Fung Bao goes on to describe how her gay son was interviewed for a newspaper and how worried she was because she was afraid that “if everybody knew, people would treat him badly, and he might get hurt.” She worries that her son might get hurt as a result of this

discrimination—protecting her son is more important than adhering to the collectivist practice of maintaining the traditional family structure. Leticia Wiley, a Filipino mother of a lesbian daughter, also worries about her child's life: [After describing how her daughter came out to her as a lesbian] “Then of course came this fear of what her life might be like. If she's open to us, then she must be open to the rest of the world as well. How would the world treat my daughter?” These Asian parents worry about protecting their children from discrimination and harassment. Later on in the focus group discussion, Fung Bao and her son Daniel Bao talk about Daniel's coming out:

Daniel: You also asked me to see certain people. You wanted me to see a doctor, or a psychiatrist, or a minister.

Fung: Lack of knowledge! That's the first time I hear about that and that's my son, so that's the instant reaction!

Not knowing how to approach the situation of her child coming out as gay to her, she thinks of ways to help him. She initially thought that she had to help him because of motherly concerns about the repercussions of living a queer lifestyle. Once her son came out to her, Fung Bao's “instant reaction” was to seek the help of professionals who she feels might be able to help her because it was “the first time I hear about that”—from “lack of knowledge,” she was clueless and felt like she herself could not aptly provide help for her son.

Another parental concern presents itself when one considers that, in coming out, the child expresses a large part of his life to his parents. In an Asian familial context, as discussed, this emotional release is significant because of how rarely sexuality is discussed. Craig Yee, a gay Chinese man, talks about his coming out experience:

It was upsetting for her because, and I talked to her about this, because she felt almost as if I was dishonest with her, that she didn't know me. Can you imagine how upsetting it would be to be a parent, to have raised this child from the point of birth, from the point of conception, and then to feel like you don't know them, like they're a stranger in your own home?  
*(Coming Out, Coming Home)*

Craig's mom, Rhoda Yee, was upset about the fact that she suddenly felt disconnected with her son. Along with the concerns of heteronormatively-raised parents suddenly finding out about a gay son, the Asian parent must cope with values associated with the traditional ideal Asian family.

Parents may not realize this, but their children are under pressure of being discriminated both on the grounds of their race and their sexual orientation. Kevin Kumashiro, assistant professor of education at Bates College in Maine, says that, “youth who are both Asian American and gay/lesbian/bisexual experience oppression on the basis of both their race and their sexual orientation simultaneously and, thus, are *doubly* oppressed” (“Supplementing normalcy and otherness” 491). Oppressive factors pressure a queer Asian American child to conceal his queer identity from his parents to not only present oneself as a “good Asian American” but also as a “good Asian.” In fact, because his deviant behavior is steering him away from core familial values, “a gay son who

discloses his gay identity to his parents may be perceived as selfish and disrespectful” (Han 209). This relates to the Asian collectivist practice of placing the community above oneself. The conflict of the ideals of the queer community and the Asian community compartmentalizes the queer Asian’s life. As a result, the child conceals his queer identity from his Asian family, further contributing to the cultural divide normally present between a queer child in the closet and his parents. The Asian parents feel culturally and emotionally distant from their child.

A single queer and Asian community is essential for the individual to feel a sense of belonging. Richard Fung, an Asian Canadian video artist and cultural critic, notes that “in [his] own experience, the existence of a gay Asian community broke down the cultural schizophrenia in which [he] related, on one hand, to a heterosexual family that affirmed [his] ethnic culture and, on the other hand, to a gay community that was predominantly white” (118). The conflicting values of the two communities are resolved when they are joined into a single queer and Asian community in which the members feel a sort of comradeship in facing their obstacles as a team. This is the reason why groups specific to Asian parents of queers exist—because the Asian collectivist culture warrants an interdependent network of support to face the struggles unique to Asian parents of queers.

### **CONCLUSION: RECONCILING TWO IDENTITIES**

Asian parents approach the struggle of having a queer child in different ways. As exemplified by the quote at the beginning of this paper, some parents simply cannot bring themselves to reconcile the clashing ideologies of traditional heteronormative Asian culture and queer culture. The gay man’s Korean mother could not initially even consider that her son might be gay. She then relates her son’s queerness to a fatal disease. These parents deem their children as failures in upholding Asian heteronormative expectations, thereby disappointing the collectivist group (the family) as a whole.

Yet, although many horror stories exist of parents rejecting their child altogether and disowning them, happy stories exist, such as Fung Bao’s and her son’s: “I do encourage [Daniel] to get married because I think the commitment so important. It’s better to be shared than lonely by yourself. Whichever way he choose is fine with me. But in my heart, I think that companionship should be very important” (*Coming Out, Coming Home*). Fung Bao chooses to reconcile her traditional heteronormative Asian values for the interest of the family, the focus of the collectivist group. She places familial values of interdependence above the Asian heteronormative tradition. Rhoda Yee shares her perspective on her son Craig’s coming out:

That’s just one very small aspect of the total person. They still haven’t changed, they didn’t all of a sudden sprout horns or become a monster—they’re the same person as the minute before they haven’t disclosed to you. I really think that the parent should keep that in mind: they’re the same person. They have not changed in the least iota. If he’s a good son, he’s still a good son. If you accept him or her, eventually, I think you will have a much much happier life and better relationship together. (*Coming Out, Coming Home*)

Rhoda shares Fung's perspective: they both value intimate relationships with their sons, regardless of their sons' abandoning of the Asian heteronormative tradition. Rhoda even goes a step further and acknowledges that her son is still the same person. Because he is still the same person, she will still care for him—not only as a mother cares for a son, but as co-members of a collectivist group: the family.

In a discussion among lesbian activists moderated by Arlene Stein, a lesbian cultural critic, Zoon Nguyen argues that “those of us who are gay people of color are often forced to choose between the gay culture and people of color culture” (Stein 92). This is what the queer Asian child is experiencing. Many existing sources stress how the intersection of an Asian identity and a queer identity unequivocally presents a conflict. However, Asian immigrant parents of second-generation Asian American children experience a different phenomenon. The dynamic created by growing up in a traditional Asian family coupled with the experience of attempting to reconcile Asian values with queer cultural values do make it difficult for Asian parents to accept a child's alternative sexuality; however, it is not impossible, especially considering that Asian families will place the well-being of the group over individual beliefs.

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## Chinese American Youth: Transforming Parents' Melancholia into Civic Engagement in Fae Mayenne Ng's *Bone*

Victoria Yee

In Fae Mayenne Ng's *Bone*, the protagonist, Leila Fu, and her stepfather, Leon Fu, are depicted in a traditional narrative of generational conflict between an American-born youth and her immigrant parent.<sup>3</sup> Leila is born in America, but Leon is a "paper son," a Chinese immigrant who is allowed into America because of purchased documents that claim he is a son of a Chinese American citizen. For Leon and Leila, normative power roles between parent and child are reversed. Leila wields a cultural and linguistic advantage, but feels disenchanting with being her father's translator and cultural broker. Meanwhile, Leon feels frustrated that America is not the welcoming country he dreamed of, but one that takes his labor and denies the contribution.

Leila attempts to overcome Leon's subsequent distrust of the American government and has him apply for Social Security so he can, at least, receive federal funds to support himself. Their interactions at the Social Security office, however, leave them frustrated and bitter. In the scene, it is obvious there is generational tension in a space typically associated with American civic engagement, the empowering exchanges in spaces or institutions of a representative democracy (National-Louis University). It often goes unnoticed, however, *how* the 1<sup>st</sup> generation Chinese parent's melancholic experience can affect their 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American children's navigation of American civic engagement. Moreover, current academic research on Chinese American civic engagement focuses on broad theories and empirical data. It claims Chinese American young people today are not civically engaged due to cultural barriers and economic pressures (Kiang, 232). But perhaps these explanations are too superficial and the research focusing too heavily at a macro level.

In this paper I use Freud's theory of unresolved grief as the framework to discuss the melancholic Asian American experience of being unable to fully obtain the American Dream. Then, I do a close reading of Ng's portrayal in *Bone* of Leila's responses to Leon at the Social Security office and her subsequent attempt to find valid identification for him. I argue Leila's feelings of responsibility toward Leon, the depiction of her transferred bitterness, and finally, the portrayal of her concluding hope, is illustrative of the potential 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American young people have to transform, at the micro level, their parents' melancholic experiences into civic affirmation and productivity.

My argument is framed by the understanding that children of color, and consequently Chinese American 2<sup>nd</sup> generation youth, experience a form of melancholia. To comprehend melancholia, I turn to Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" which defines mourning and melancholia, at the most basic level, as the reaction to the loss of a loved object, place, or ideal. There is a loss of interest in the outside world, a reluctance to engage in activity, among other distinctive indicators. Freud argues that *melancholia* goes one step further than mourning. Instead of reducing the importance of an

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<sup>3</sup> Leon is really Leila's stepfather, but for clarity, I later refer to him as Leila's father.

individual's surroundings like mourning does, melancholia causes the individual to be self-depreciating and self-vilifying (248).

Freud claims that in mourning, the healthy individual must work to give up ties to the lost object, whether it is a literal or symbolic displacement. Through remembering, recollection, and restoration, the survivor fulfills the loss with a substitute in order for the "ego [to be] free and uninhibited again" (245). However, in the case of melancholia, the lost love-object is turned inward and spurs a narcissistic regression of which the individual cannot escape. The survivor is "aware of the loss...but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (245). The individual cannot relinquish the lost love-object and thereby cannot overcome the accompanying trauma.

Freud presents mourning and melancholia as an individual pathological framework. Extrapolating his theory into a broader perspective, Chinese immigrants have, in a literal and symbolic sense, lost or are unable to reach their desired objects, places, or ideas, too. Many risk their lives or livelihood to immigrate to America under the assumption that as long as they work hard they will be successful (Fong, 13-15). However, for just as many, their positive attitude diminishes as America casts them into the shadows but exploits them for their labor (Chan, 44-46). The immigrants' goals of assimilation and achieving the American Dream become placed at an unattainable and melancholic distance.

The concept that race and immigration has a close relationship to mourning is not new. Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* expands upon how race is intertwined with trauma and conflict. Through an analysis of literature, art, and history, Cheng illustrates how racial melancholia is not only a product of racism, but also a factor in racial identity formation. She claims America is a nation founded on unattainable objects, thoughts, and ideals (10). Consequently, the resultant melancholia of its people is embedded in the country's institutions and practices. In particular, she claims that people of color are bound in a desperate, melancholic cycle of desiring what they never have, and never will, achieve. Struggling with the dichotomy between liberty and struggle, love and fear, and assimilation and exclusion, they are forced to "internalize discipline and rejection *and* the installation of a scripted context of perception" (17). Fractured and disenfranchised, many immigrants are forced to relinquish their memories and its meanings into the past America wants to forget.

Taking Cheng's research that racial melancholia is systemic and pervasive in a person of color's immigrant experience, Leon in Ng's *Bone* is a strong model of Freud's melancholia as an individual and as a collective representative. Here, literary representation is not used as evidence to identify and diagnose racial melancholia and its link to civic engagement. Rather, given the novel's purpose as a literary production to re-imagine the experiences of Asian Americans without significant external constraints or pressures, *Bone* serves as a lens to study and detangle reality.

Like many Chinese immigrants from 1910 to 1940, Leon enters the United States after being interrogated and processed at the Angel Island Immigration Station. He sees the "Freedom Goddess" in New York, predicts he will have a "*hao sai gai*" (the good life), and believes the popular American myth that he will be successful as long as he persists (Ng 7, 9). Despite years of working numerous jobs for extensive hours, he ends up as a discontent old man who lives alone and does odd jobs. Moreover, his life is beset

with economic and emotional struggle. His daughter, Ona, commits suicide and his business start-up collapses.

In response to all this sadness, he “blame[s] all of America for making big promises and breaking every one” (100). To Leon, America does not fulfill its side of the bargain, and he is caught unawares as a victim of “America’s...betrayal of its own democratic ideology” (Cheng, 11). Leon mourns “the loss of [the American]...ideal,” and especially after Ona’s suicide, “abases himself...[and] extends his self-criticism back over to the past” (Freud, 246). Leon is reflective of the internal guilt and self-degradation Freud defines as melancholia, and this unhealthy attitude is apparent when Leon prepares a gravesite ritual for Grandpa Leong. Leila notices his actions are not only for Grandpa Leong and Ona, but also because, “[he] blamed himself. The misplaced grave, the forgotten bones...Leon was looking for a part of his own lost life” (85).

From a more collective framework, Leon’s melancholia is also racially derived. First, as an immigrant who leaves China as a paper son, he deliberately discards his identity to assume another’s in hopes of receiving the presumed benefits of American life. Already he is forced to mourn countless losses such as identity, family, homeland, and language. In addition, Leon is pressured to recreate his history, first through fraudulent paperwork, then later through exaggerated stories to his children to explain his failure to live up to the American Dream (Ng, 55). Although he is cognizant of his immediate losses, he is, like Freud asserts, unconscious of “what he has lost in him” (245). Leon does not realize that just by being a paper son, he is an object of institutionalized exclusion and monitored immigration. He is evidence of the effects of what Eng and Han call a “national melancholia,” or America’s overhanging specter of guilt that exudes the ideals of liberty but encourages the amnesia of institutionalized racism (Eng & Han, 347). Leon is rejected from housing opportunities, employment, and other facets of American life. His exclusion from mainstream America is also exacerbated because as an Asian, he is perpetually perceived of as a foreigner and foreclosed from truly achieving integration (Cheng, 10).

A striking example of exclusion is when Leila brings Leon to the Social Security office and the interviewer asks Leon for evidence of his citizenship. Leon does not have the required paperwork with him and starts cursing. He feels that despite his years working for America, the government has yet to recognize him as a legitimate member. Leila bitterly recognizes Leon’s cursing as “a replay of how [his shipmates] cursed him out” (53), and that her father was treated as an inferior his entire life. The scene illustrates Cheng’s argument in *The Melancholy of Race* that claims, “in the last century and a half American citizenship has been legally, economically and culturally defined over and against the simultaneous exclusion and the unseen racialization of the Asian immigrant” (13). The law’s reluctance to recognize Leon as a full-fledged citizen symbolically outlaws his existence and erodes his identity. “People be the tell me. I never talk English good. Them tell me,” Leon angrily protests (Ng, 53). Leila is embarrassed with Leon’s outburst and yells at him. In this exchange, Leon illustrates that “he is trapped, not by having been seen as invisible but by suspecting himself to be so” (Caruth, 16). At the Social Security office, Leon is catered to, but his dramatic response indicates a history of unease and a psychological fear of being rejected yet again. And like countless times before, Leon is forced to subdue his grief (now by his own daughter) and internalize not

only the white ideal and way of doing things, but also the uncomfortable position of longing after it.

Leila is the cultural and linguistic broker in the transaction, and current academic literature specifically addressing 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American youth is sparse. However, there is overwhelming consensus that Asian Americans (Chinese Americans are understood to be under the umbrella term of “Asian American”) have a unique experience of navigating between two worlds. Academia claims that in the modern-day Asian American family there is often a cultural and linguistic barrier that “has created gaps in the ability of American-born Asians to communicate with elders” (Lee, 32). Leila’s interaction with Leon accurately exemplifies such a situation. The dialogue between her and Leon is at best, limited and superficial. Nonetheless, even after the spectacle at the Social Security office, Leila still feels it is necessary to help her father even if it means embarrassment to her, and participation in a political system he does not trust.

In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” Eng and Han suggest that the melancholia arising from the first generation’s inability to achieve the American dream can be transferred to the second generation. They hypothesize that the second generation may feel obliged or guilt-tripped to “sacrifice” themselves—such as their values and personal aspirations—to help their family even though the family may not even want or appreciate it. If a parent’s “libido is not replenished by the investment in new objects” then the parent, intentionally or not, transfers his or her losses and pressures to those closest—usually the sons or daughters (Eng & Han, 353).

After bringing her father to the Social Security office, Leila goes through Leon’s suitcase to find proof of his citizenship. She demonstrates what Eng and Han claim is an “internalized guilt and residual anger” from her father’s racial melancholia (353). Aware of Leon’s experience as a paper son and his hardships in America, it can be inferred that Leila transfers his unfulfilled dreams onto herself to assume and repair. Her sense of responsibility to her father is explicitly narrated when Leila’s sister, Nina, claims that Leila has “always been on standby [for the parents]” (Ng, 31). Nina recounts the sister filling out forms at the Chinatown unemployment agencies and waiting for job calls when they were younger. Nina asserts, “And I know about *should*. I know about *have to*. We should. We want to do more, we want to do everything” (30). Due to the day-to-day challenges of survival, the daughters are compelled to be civically engaged to claim rights their parents naturally should have had access to.

However, while Nina has given up bending over backwards for Leon, Leila continues to feel obligated to, and depressed by him. Due to her close proximity and frequent interactions with Leon, she carries the weight of his trauma. Not only is it at a physical level of “lugging the heavy brick-colored suitcase — the one he arrived on Angel Island with,” to her house, but also at the mental level, such as carrying the weight of the memories he told her “one hundred and nine times” (54). Caruth’s theory in “Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals” explains that survivor’s guilt, or the feeling that one did not fully experience the pain of the victim, is one of the most painful sensations. Leila, as a Chinese American young person, has not experienced the same traumatic dislocation as her father. Consequently she feels that she too, should understand his coping mechanisms and participates in political systems and structures in his stead.

Nonetheless, Leila initially feels bitter with the inheritance and its responsibilities. At the Social Security office, Leila chastises her father's protests despite knowing that it reflects poorly on them. She brushes any guilt off with a "Leon will get over it," and during the ride back to Chinatown, neither father nor daughter apologizes (53). But when Leila opens Leon's suitcase to find appropriate documentation of Leon's citizenship, she immediately feels uncomfortable and ashamed. Leila desperately thinks about having a scotch to endure not only the convoluted material she finds, but also to absorb all the disheartening evidence of her father's rejections. Contrary to everything Leila had been told growing up, "I only had to open the first few letters to know the story: 'We Don't Want You'...the stories came back, without the humor, without hope. On paper, Leon was not the hero" (55).

Leila subsequently becomes frustrated at why Leon would want to keep all the bad memories and feels an urge to destroy them. "Gathering all Leon's papers, burning his secrets and maybe his answers, and then scattering the ashes into the bay...I wanted to get everything out of sight," She says (Ng, 57). Leila does not want to be civically engaged in this way; she does not to navigate through political systems for her father yet again. Leila feels a sense of ownership to the trauma imbedded within the paperwork and projects it onto herself. She attempts to render the documents invisible and tells herself "to concentrate and only look for that document I needed, the one with the right name and birth date" (57). But as she works through the letters, photos, and other snippets of Leon's paper trail, Leila is forced to identify, empathize, and wonder about her father's unspoken experiences.

Through the process of uncovering Leon's compilation of lies and truths in a web of what Cheng calls "self-affirmation, self-denigration, projection, desire, identification, and hostility," Leila ultimately realizes that Leon is correct to save all his paperwork. Without his papers, the nation and eventually the family, would misremember and forget him. As a man who had been rejected at so many levels, from fair employment to social assimilation, paperwork is Leon's only means to claim American space, time, and credibility. "I want to remember them all," Leila concludes (58). Her negotiations of immigration, sacrifice, and loss in her father's paperwork allow Leila to recognize that with her American cultural and linguistic competence, she can build from what her father so tragically leaves behind. She can utilize his paperwork to claim political resources, power, and recognition—things he had been denied since he arrived to America. Leila ultimately helps Leon receive Social Security, and Leon proudly informs a friend, "Lazy bum...I'm retired. I'm eating social security" (11).

By taking the first step in recovering and comprehending Leon's history, Leila transforms his disenfranchisement and fractured stories into not only financial support, but also an affirmation and preservation of his existence in America and in his family's mind. This reconstruction through struggle is a process Eng and Han argue for in "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." They assert that racial melancholia is an everyday reality among Asian Americans, and that it is neither pathological nor permanent. Leila in *Bone* proactively transmits the emotional stressors from her inherited melancholia into gaining government funding and recognition for her father through Social Security payments.

Given that Leila in *Bone* is able to use her transferred melancholia into productivity by means of civic engagement, then what about the thousands of 2<sup>nd</sup>

generation Chinese Americans today struggling with issues of racism and mimicry? This “productivity” does not appear to manifest itself in current data or research about civic engagement among Chinese American (or Asian American) young people. There remains a mainstream assumption that there is a scarcity of Chinese American youth involved in civic engagement in comparison to their peers from other communities of color (Lai, Tam-Cho, and Kim, 50). Explanations vary across the spectrum. Authors Karnow and Yoshihara suggest that since many Asian parents are recent immigrants, they are too busy or too unacquainted with the democratic process to focus on politics. A general cultural aversion is also attributed to explain the low numbers. Judy Chu, a Chinese American and former mayor of Monterey Park, CA (a heavily Asian community) is quoted, “Taking a lot of risks and a lot of criticism, asserting a point of view and talking about yourself — that is not the Asian nature” (Karnow and Yoshihara, 52).

However, these low numbers on Chinese American civic engagement are derived from research done at a macro lens and at the level of electoral politics (Nakanishi, Zhou, 20). Most of the data collected are used to generate sweeping theories or voting analyses about a community of color. Furthermore, the data is not disaggregated, and glosses over factors like ethnicity and income level that are highly influential in contributing to or against high-profile political participation (Ong, 32). And perhaps most alarmingly, data on civic engagement ignores grassroots level of participation. To what extent do 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American youth participate in day-to-day interactions in spaces of civic engagement like a Social Security office? How do they make meaningful and informed decisions?

As is exemplified in Leon and Leila’s interactions in *Bone*, there is value and credence in the roles that Chinese American young people play at the micro scale in civic participation. Although there may be challenges such as cultural barriers and economic pressures that prevent higher levels of politics for Chinese American youth like mainstream evidence suggests, it is superficial to claim that simply because of these factors, youth are not engaged or interested. Leon and Leila will mostly likely never show up, save for a numerical value, on social science publications or demographic charts. The authors of these data sets will focus on historical trajectories or empirical profiles of Chinese Americans. Through that lens, Leon and Leila will not be considered civically engaged citizens. Nakanishi, the former Director the UCLA Asian American Studies Department, claims that in general, Asian Americans prefer, and have a history of, pursuing non-electoral political engagement, resorting to “lobbying to protests; developing networks rather than conscious-raising, in realizing their maximum worth” (Nakanishi, 106). There are alternative methods to claim community space and gains without engaging in the mainstream political activities academia currently places precedence on.

Leila, like many 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American youth from low-income families, is involved at a micro level of civic engagement from a young age (Kiang, 232). Growing up, Leila “hated standing in the lines: social security, disability, immigration. What I hated most was the talking for Mah and Leon, the whole translation number. Every English word counted and I was responsible” (15). Pressured to navigate political systems to gain visibility and resources that her parents are, directly or indirectly, denied, Leila partakes in civic engagement by participating in the institutions of a representative democracy. Leila resents doing so, and the unhappiness stems from residues of her

parents' transferred bitterness of not having the access, or the ability to access, the resources themselves. Leila is not aware of her melancholia or conscious that she is being civically engaged; she just knows she needs to help her family. It is only during the process of obtaining Social Security for Leon when she is older, does Leila realize the roots of his sorrow, the importance of political participation in preserving and reclaiming his identity, and the significance of her role as a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American in helping her father receive it.

Leila's fictional experience in *Bone* is grounded in reality and in social contexts. An overwhelming number of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American youth from low-income families is reported to express great consciousness of their parents' hardships and sacrifices. Kiang, the Director of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, conducts individual and focus group interviews of 2<sup>nd</sup> generation individuals of working-class background for his article "Asian Pacific American Youth: Pathways for Political Participation." One interviewee asserts, "My mother and father don't speak English. They try and protect themselves inside their house...and sometimes they're too busy with their work, trying to earn a living, trying to survive in this society. So they try so hard, they just forget about us..." (242). Similar to Ng's depiction of Leila, the youth in Kiang's study experience a form of melancholia that they transfer and internalize from their parents. In addition, equipped with language and cultural skills, most of the youth are burdened with the responsibility of taking care of errands that involve interaction with people and political systems outside the home.

Many of these youth are also involved in activities such as community service and student government—activities considered as mainstream civic engagement at the micro level. However, despite the challenges in the daily civic obligations the youth fulfill for their parents, most insist that they get involved not only for representation and power, but also to find a sense of belonging in a country that categorizes them as foreigners. An interviewee who campaigned for student office explained that running "is a very strong and concrete statement to indicate that I belong. This is my home" (253). Like Leila, the interviewees transmit their buried frustrations and translate it into something positive.

The 1<sup>st</sup> generation low-income Chinese parent's melancholic experience can affect the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation's navigation of civic engagement. The youth first see it first as a vehicle of grief, cynicism, and reluctance. After all, civic engagement is a process that is presumably inherent in the American lifestyle. However, for those foreclosed from the American Dream, its resources and recognition are challenging to access. For many Chinese low-income immigrant families, it falls upon the American-born children to rearticulate the civic system with little guidance but with great pressure (Kiang, 250).

This paper does not delve into the reasons behind why there is a mainstream assumption of Chinese Americans not being civically engaged. However, it is important to recognize that in this assumption, the encounters and decisions many 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese Americans make at the micro level on a daily basis are neglected. There is credit to be given to these families and youth. Taking into account the family limitations, psychological barriers, and social constraints Leila deals with in *Bone*, it would be extraordinarily difficult for her to even think about the macro level when micro decisions are difficult enough. It is not impossible, however, to reinstate the losses and recover from racial melancholia and its injuries (Eng & Han, 260). Leila's process of obtaining

Social Security for Leon offers a means within their capacity to gain political power and exercise a psychological affirmation of family and history. And for many 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese American young people, in their daily micro acts of civic engagement, they are not only forcing others to acknowledge them as more than just “perpetual foreigners,” but mastering the mysteries of their own families as well.

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## **Great Expectations: The Negative Consequences and Policy Implications of the Asian American “Model Minority”**

### **Stereotype**

Michael Tayag

*"By any criterion we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including the native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort."*

*-William Petersen, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style"*

*"At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities—Chinese-Americans are winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work...Still being taught in Chinatown is the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts—not a welfare check in order to reach America's 'promised land.'"*

*-"Success of One Minority Group in the U.S."*

The stereotype of Asian Americans as the “model minority” has fostered psychologically and educationally adverse societal pressures for them to be successful in school and in society at large. The term “model minority” originates from these two high-profile articles from 1966. It suggests that Asian Americans, by virtue of their industry and, perhaps, natural intelligence, stand out from other minorities as high-achieving, academically successful, and financially sound members of American society. This laudatory label for Asian Americans was based on such criteria as years of education, income, test scores, occupation, etc. Since it was coined in the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement, many sociologists like Li-Ching Wang suggest that the creation of the term was intended to undercut the political movements of other minorities, particularly African Americans and Latinos (Wang 22). However, regardless of why the term was invented, the concept of the “model minority” has inevitably affected the self-perception of Asian American students, as well as the expectations placed upon them by parents, teachers, and society at large.

Research has shown that the stereotype of the model minority may have negative effects on the educational achievement and psychological well-being of Asian American youth. A number of sources, including the two articles aforementioned and a study by Stanley Sue and Sumie Okazaki in 1990, claim that Asian Americans are in fact a “model minority,” in large part because of cultural values focusing on education and diligence. However, other scholars like Bob Suzuki claim that popular statistics suggesting that Asian Americans are more academically and economically successful than other ethnic groups are flawed due to confounding variables, such as biased sampling—thus, the “model minority” stereotype is false. But regardless of the stereotype’s validity, Mei Tang, Guofang Li, and others explain that it fosters psychological and educational hardships for Asian American youth. These scholars explain that the stereotype is responsible for higher rates of psychological issues like depression, as well as a lack of educational assistance, particularly for new immigrants just learning English. Thus,

researchers like Guofang Li, Yong Zhao, and Wei Qiu propose policy changes that can tackle these psychological and educational obstacles.

A reexamination of accepted academic and economic statistics (ex: the SAT's) suggests that the "model minority" stereotype is a myth. I will argue that this myth has negative educational and psychosocial ramifications for Asian Americans. To do this, I will survey the various educational services provided to Asian American students and explore the psychological problems associated with the pressures of the "model minority" concept. I will then discuss various policy implementations which may address these academic and psychological challenges, as suggested by scholars who have researched the development of Asian American youth.

### **Fact or Fiction?**

Throughout the past few decades, evidence in favor of the "model minority" concept has largely been based on high educational and occupational statistics for Asian Americans in comparison to American society at large, as cited in Bob Suzuki's "Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype" (2002). Stanley Sue and Sumie Okazaki's 1990 study and Valeria Pang's "Educating the Whole Child" (1998) have posed possible cultural explanations for this seemingly greater achievement. I argue, however, that these statistics are not valid when Asian Americans are disaggregated into cultural subgroups (i.e. Japanese as distinct from Filipino as distinct from Hmong, etc.). Though popular statistics suggest that Asian Americans are high-achieving in all areas, more sophisticated methods of statistical analysis discussed by Bob Suzuki suggest that Asian Americans are significantly trailing behind their white counterparts in almost all areas, including reading and writing, upward occupational mobility, and income. These statistical analyses and an examination of the differences between various Asian subgroups in Chi-Ah Chun and Stanley Sue's "Mental Health Issues Concerning Asian Pacific American Children" and Yeh's "Asian American Students Who Are Educationally at Risk," show that many Asian Americans are actually struggling in areas like income, occupational upward mobility, and educational attainment. These sources suggest that the "model minority" stereotype is a myth which creates an inaccurate perception of guaranteed educational and economic success for Asian Americans.

When taken as a whole, Asian Americans seem to be high-achieving in a number of areas, surpassing even whites in terms of educational attainment and socioeconomic status. For example, a large proportion of Asian Americans graduate from college. According to the 1990 census, 38% of Asian Americans were college graduates, in contrast with only 20% of the United States population as a whole. In addition, the income of Asian Americans has continued to rise since the 1970's. The 1990 census indicated that the median income of the Asian American families was greater than that of white ones. Scholars have also argued that the phenomenal economic rise of Japan, China, and other Asian countries may also contribute to the perception that Asian Americans are economically better-off than white Americans (Suzuki 23).

Valeria Pang states that one popular explanation for the educational achievement of Asian Americans focuses on cultural values—including expectations to succeed, high affiliation needs, use of guilt and shame, and family obligations, all of which have socialized Asian Americans to do well in school (Pang 276). Some Asian American

cultures, particularly East Asians, foster in students a sense of obligation to please one's family by succeeding in school, as well as guilt or shame associated with not reaching parental academic standards. Asian American students who adopt these behaviors may work harder in school and thus get better grades (Pang 276).

Sue and Okazaki, however, contend that “[r]esearch linking parenting styles and cultural values with academic achievement has been sparse” (Pang 276) and offer the concept of *relative functionalism* as a different cultural explanation. This theory states in short that students adopt behaviors which ultimately advance one's socioeconomic status. For example, students study hard because it means doing better in school, which in turn leads to a better, higher-paying job. In Sue and Okazaki's study, “[s]tudents identified what is relative or important to others and adopted these behaviors; studying hard, getting good grades, and pleasing teachers lead to success in school and so are functional behaviors” stressed by Asian and Pacific American (APA) families (Pang 276). Sue and Okazaki believe that the minority status of APAs has impacted educational attainment. Since education is functionally one of the few avenues available to minorities, social obstacles in society for Asian Americans reinforce the importance of education in earning socioeconomic upward mobility (Pang 276).

However, aside from these cultural explanations, due to confounding variables, the statistics themselves may not represent an accurate picture of the achievements of Asian Americans, particularly with respect to work and socioeconomic status in connection to levels of education. According to Bob Suzuki, Asian American families had higher median incomes in the 1990 census because they had more earners contributing to family income and were concentrated at high-cost and thus high-income areas. When data was disaggregated and more refined statistical analyses accounted for these factors, the median family income of Asian Americans actually fell below that of white families. Suzuki states: “The analyses...show that the annual per capita income of Asian Americans was considerably less than their white counterparts who had the same level of education, and the disparity was even greater when level of education and geographical area of residence was kept constant.” Further, the proportion of Asian Americans living below the poverty line was considerably greater than that of whites (Suzuki 22-23). With regard to career options, research has shown that native-born Asian American men are significantly less likely to be in management positions than whites, and they also have lower incomes. Although well-educated Asian Americans have relatively easy access to entry-level jobs, they continue to face greater challenges in income and upward job mobility than whites (Suzuki 24). Clearly, Asian Americans, like other minorities, are still struggling to achieve economic and occupational equity with their white counterparts.

Even if the widely accepted statistics on Asian American income and educational attainment were valid, cultural explanations like aforementioned *relative functionalism* are invalidated by the fact that Asian Americans make up many different cultures, each with different values and different levels of educational and economic success. The term “Asian American” is an umbrella identity for more than twenty different ethnic groups who speak over thirty different languages. The cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity of Asians results in social, economic, and educational conditions distinct to each ethnic group (Chun, Stanley 75). For example, dropout rates vary among different ethnic Asian groups. In San Diego City schools, for instance, the 2001-2002 dropout rates of Pacific

Islanders was 13.0%, compared with 9.8% for Indochinese students, 6.3% for Filipinos, and only 5.8% for other Asians (i.e. Chinese and Japanese Americans). Further, the tremendous growth in the number of Asian American students in general attending college in the past couple decades obscures the fact that some Asian ethnic subgroups have struggled to enter and remain in the educational system. For instance, while 58.4% of Indian and Pakistani have graduated from college, only 2.9% of Hmong Americans have college degrees (Yeh 61). From such statistics, it is clear that some groups, particularly Southeast Asians (Hmong, Vietnamese, etc.), perform at a much lower academic level than other Asians (Indian, Chinese, Japanese, etc.).

### **How a “Positive” Stereotype Goes Wrong**

The “model minority” myth has proven detrimental, because it masks the psychosocial and educational needs of many Asian Americans, such that these needs have been systematically neglected at the institutional level. In fact, the “model minority” myth has a number of negative psychological and educational ramifications. For the high-achieving students, a 2000 study by Sapna Cheryan and Galen Bodenhouer shows that good grades come at the cost of a disposition for psychological problems and strained parent-child relationships due to parental pressure for academic achievement. The factor of family expectations, paired with the fear of undermining the reputation of one’s group, may lead to the markedly lower academic performance of Asian Americans when ethnicity is made salient. For the low-achieving students, a lack of social initiatives and resources do not allow an improvement in academic performance, leading to a lack of higher education and a perpetuation of socioeconomic degradation. These issues are discussed in Valeria Pang’s “Educating the Whole Child,” Li-Rong Cheung’s “Language Assessment and Instructional Strategies...,” and Bob Suzuki’s “Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype.” Bob Suzuki, Chi-Ah Chun and Stanley Sue’s “Mental Health Issues Concerning Asian Pacific American Children,” and Mei Tang’s “Psychological Effects on Being Perceived as a Model Minority...” explain that the stereotype is also largely responsible for a number of psychosocial problems unusually prevalent among Asian American students, including anxiety, depression, and social incompetence.

Even for high-achieving students who would seem to fit the educational standards of the “model minority” myth, the academic pressures exerted on Asian American students by the stereotype cause increased anxiety and lower academic performance. In Cheryan and Bodenhausen’s 2000 experiment, ethnicity salience was linked with a decreased ability to concentrate on a mathematical task. In the experiment, the participants (forty-nine Asian American women) were first asked to complete a 10-item survey designed to manipulate identity salience. In the ethnicity condition, they were asked to respond to such items as “Overall, my ethnicity is considered good by others,” while in the gender condition, questions were reworded to focus on gender instead of ethnicity. Participants were then asked to complete a quantitative skill test consisting of twenty mathematics questions from previous versions of the Graduate Record Examination, followed by a final questionnaire testing for potential mediators in the experiment. The experiment concludes that “positive stereotypes (at least when they form the basis for salient public expectations) can place a considerable burden on members of the stereotyped group, adversely affecting their performance in the stereotyped domain”

(Cheryan, Bodenhausen 401)—in this case mathematics. The resulting lower test scores are linked by the final questionnaire to a greater tendency to get distracted from the task at hand. It is a possibility that participants reported distractedness as a way of rationalizing what they thought to be poor performance in the first place, but “mediational analyses in which the causal direction was reversed (i.e., poor performance being assumed to cause reports of concentration problems) did not yield meaningful results” (Cheryan, Bodenhausen 401). Regardless of this possible mediator, however, there seems to be a clear connection between the pressure to live up to public expectations and the tendency to “choke” under this pressure. Such findings show that even a positively stereotyped social identity can threaten academic performance, especially for high-achieving students, due to the fear of failing to confirm the positive stereotype (Cheryan, Bodenhausen 399-402).

For low-achieving students who lack academic resources or who may not be intellectually gifted or motivated enough to reach society’s academic expectations, educational difficulties (particularly those of English learners) are ignored by the educational system under the impression that they as a “model minority” do not need help. This can be seen in the findings of the Asian Pacific American Education Advisory (APAEA) Committee of the California State University (CSU) system, which studied the problems and needs of the CSU campuses in 1990. One unexpected observation was the dire need to provide assistance to Asian American students who did not speak English as their first language. During its hearings, the committee heard from many Asian American English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students who recounted their many attempts to pass a writing test required for graduation, often delaying graduation by one or two years. The committee found that the student service programs tended to exclude Asian American students. It stated: “APA students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, are underserved by these programs and are often in dire need of assistance” (Suzuki 27). Many limited English proficient (LEP) Asian Americans are intimidated by school affairs, including communicating with peers, teachers, administrators, and staff. These students retreat to non-English speaking environments where television programs, newspapers, books, and magazines are available in their home language. Intensive language training is crucial for these students. Yet while the number of LEP students has increased over the past few decades, support for bilingual education for LEP students with special needs has decreased (Cheung 189). Because the “model minority” myth causes the educational system to overlook the needs of underachieving Asian American students, they are never given a fair chance to improve their academic standing.

From a psychosocial perspective, all Asian American students are affected by the “model minority” stereotype—that is, regardless of whether a student is high-achieving or low-achieving, mental health risks like depression and anxiety and social problems occur much more frequently in Asian American youth than youth in other ethnic groups. Because of the model minority stereotype, parents, instructors, and even peers often subject Asian American students to unrealistically high expectations (Suzuki 27). As a result, Asian American students are prone to social isolation, discrimination, cultural confusion (between their Asian and American roots), and an internalization of their race and socioeconomic status as inferior to the majority group (Tang 11-16). Studies cited by Chi-Ah Chun and Stanley Sue measured the levels of depression in community samples and found that Asian American children and adolescents tend to have higher levels than

whites. Other studies suggest that Asian American children tend to be more anxious than their white counterparts. Further, Chinese American boys were observed to have more interpersonal problems and less social competence than the American norm (Chun, Stanley 77).

Unfortunately, these psychosocial problems are not recognized by parents, the educational system, and society at large, because Asian American students are expected by society to be self-supportive overachievers without any mental turmoil. In this way, Asian American students, whose cultural values may already dissuade them from seeking mental health services, are not encouraged to find help. In his article “Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype,” Bob Suzuki’s personal anecdote illustrates the importance of expanding psychological services oriented towards Asian American students. He once worked at an institution which had an unusually large counseling center—there were around thirty professional counselors on its staff. However, not one of these counselors was Asian American, despite the fact that more than 15 percent of the student body was comprised of Asian Americans. When he inquired into the situation, he was told that “very few Asian American students used the services of the center, and the staff apparently concluded that the Asian American students were so well-adjusted and had so few personal problems that they had no need for psychological counseling” (Suzuki 26). When he insisted that an Asian American counselor be hired, she was inundated with Asian American students seeking her advice on a wide range of psychosocial problems. She had such a backlog of students that she had to cross-train a couple of other counselors about typical problems faced by Asian American students (Suzuki 26). Suzuki states: “I believe that the counseling center was influenced strongly by the model minority stereotype. Asian American students have generally been stereotyped as... overachievers who come from well-to-do families. It may have been inconceivable to many of the center’s staff that such students were encountering any serious psychological problems,” which would thus explain the lack of much-needed psychological resources on that campus and others throughout the country (Suzuki 26).

### **The Root of the Problem**

Because schools and society play a large role in the education of children, regardless of cultural values or family background, educational policy changes can be implemented to address the psychological and educational needs of Asian American students. Studies such as Yong Zhao and Wei Qiu’s “Policy Implications of Model Minority Educational Research” and Guofang Li’s “Other People’s Success” suggest that the educational system should treat each student as an independent individual; offer more services for low-achieving Asian American youth; identify and address personal psychological problems; and address the fact that high-achieving Asian students’ academic excellence comes at the cost of other skills. These studies claim that such policy changes can improve the overall academic performance and psychological-well being of Asian American students.

For example, because Asian Americans represent a multitude of different cultures, each with a distinct set of cultural backgrounds and academic achievements, Zhao and Qiu suggest that educational policies not treat Asian Americans as a homogeneous group. While the Census Bureau’s categorization may not be easily changed, they state it is

necessary in education that a different system of categorization be adopted. The system should reflect the differences within the Asian American population. As aforementioned, Southeast Asians who were forced to migrate to America as refugees more recently than other Asians perform at a much lower academic level. Thus, a new categorization could be based on two dimensions: cultural origin and length of residence in the United States. In this way, the various learning styles and academic levels of different Asian American students can be considered to make education more individualized and culturally aware (Zhao, Qiu 318).

In the same vein, Guoshang Li suggests that schools offer more services for new immigrants, English-language learners, and other underachieving Asian American youth—particularly in the area of communication and language development. To be more effective in teaching struggling Asian American students, schools and policymakers can develop an appropriate curriculum oriented to ESL students, rather than using mainstream curriculum. Schools can infuse curricula with information about the bilingual and multicultural population, such that students can understand and connect with educational material on a deeper level. By implementing culturally responsive teaching, schools can address a student's individual educational needs and foster connections between a student's home and school environments (Li 228). Particularly for newly assimilating immigrants, both families and schools can have a part in encouraging the academic advancement of students in a healthy and supportive way.

Zhao and Qiu claim that the educational system ought also to address the psychological needs of Asian American youth. While the media have been promoting the Asians as model minorities for decades, there has been very little media coverage of the psychological challenges facing Asian students uncovered by scholarly research. Actions should be taken to bring awareness to schools, teachers, and the general public of the psychological needs of Asian American students. Further, schools should employ bi-cultural paraprofessionals or counselors who can effectively facilitate communication between school and the home. This will help both parties listen to each other's concerns and expectations, allowing students to develop without overly stressful parental pressures to achieve highly in education (Zhao, Qiu 324).

Lastly, Zhao and Qiu state that schools should address the lack of social and personal skills faced by many Asian Americans who have placed much greater emphasis on diligence and educational achievement than social development. A 2001 study by Yu-Wen Ying, et al. compared Asian American college students with their peers on their degree of cross-racial engagement. Its relationship with sense of coherence—the extent to which the world is comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful—was also tested. As hypothesized, sense of coherence was significantly predicted by degree of cross-racial engagement. Asian Americans reported the fewest number of cross-racial groups in their friendship network, a predictor of a lower sense of coherence (Ying, et al. 70). This study shows that, in order to achieve excellence in school subjects, Asians students may give up opportunities to develop other skills and abilities, such as creativity and independent thinking skills. While academic performance may allow Asian students access to higher education, critical thinking and people skills may be a more effective means to success in the real world. Therefore, the educational system ought to allow more opportunities for Asians to develop their interpersonal skills and overall social competence (Zhao, Qiu 325-326).

## Conclusion

The concept of the “model minority” seems to be a positive stereotype. Why would Asians refute their characterization as hard-working, intelligent, and economically successful? The problem, however, lies in the fact that this is not true of most Asians, especially recent Southeast Asian immigrants. The false stereotype of the “model minority” allows the burgeoning of pressure-related psychological problems in Asian American youth, as well as the educational neglect of millions of underachieving Asian American students. By monitoring different ethnic subgroups separately, establishing and expanding culturally appropriate services to address the educational and psychological needs of Asian Americans, and encouraging the development of important non-academic skills, schools can give all Asian Americans a fair chance at educational and socioeconomic success. Only in this way can the educational system improve the growing disparity between Asian American achievement and societal expectations.

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## International Hotel Reflection Piece on SROs

Kimberly Vu

The International Hotel was historically comprised of SROs, or single resident occupancies. Older Filipino men, also called Manongs, resided in the I-Hotel until 1981, when it was demolished by economic and political powers seeking to expand the financial districts of San Francisco. Today, the International Hotel stands as a senior housing complex. Traces of its rich past, however, still reside in the walls that housed these manongs and other low-income, ethnic groups.

Single resident occupancies refer to tenant buildings that contain single rooms for one or two people—much like an apartment complex. The tenants of SROs typically share bathrooms and kitchens, as part of communal living. They cater primarily to people of lower socioeconomic status, widows, seasonal or traveling workers, and students—people who do not need multiple rooms, comfort, or space.

The term single resident occupancy was coined in New York City in the 1930s. Single resident occupancies continue to exist in many of the major cities in the United States, including NYC, San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The high proportion of immigrants and low-income workers who worked grueling jobs during America's growth to a more industrialized nation perpetuated the existence of SRO's.

The majority of single resident occupancies in large cities were formerly hotels, such as the I-Hotel. The hotels were converted to serve the newly predominant population in the cities—workers—after the migration of upper class families away from the cities and toward suburbia.

Today, as wealthier members of society buy housing in low-income areas, in a process referred to as gentrification, tenants of single resident occupancies are evicted from their homes, unable to afford the rent due to increased rent from new owners. While this is not exactly the case of the Manongs and the International Hotel, the concept is the same: forcing low-income tenants onto the streets for the sake of those in economic power without regards to providing housing for the evicted.

San Francisco was once known as the “Hotel City” for all the housing that it provided for low-income families and individuals. The history and economy of San Francisco depended largely on the existence of single resident occupancies housing seasonal workers, immigrant workers, and other general low-wage workers. SRO's were especially important to immigrant families in Chinatown, Japantown, Manilatown, and the Mission district, as they struggled to survive and prosper in a new country.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many single resident occupancies were demolished and replaced with high rise buildings or more luxurious dwellings. These new projects resulted in a spike in the level of homelessness in the cities as low-income tenants were displaced from their homes without alternative housing of equal rent available.

Currently, there are 518 single resident occupancy buildings which house 30,000 or more people. It is evident that SROs still contribute largely to the San Franciscan community.

I had never heard of the term single resident occupancy until I partook in this class—Asian American Culture and Community. I had heard of tenant housing, where

there are cramped quarters and poor services for the tenants, but I was not aware that there was a specific term referring to these kinds of buildings. I also was unaware that they still exist today, because I simply associated them with my history books and events of the past. Furthermore, I did not take heed of the various forms of housing available in the United States. My main distinctions were either that one has a house, apartment, or mansion...or one was homeless. This crucial understanding that I lacked made it difficult for me to grasp the concept that there existed single resident occupancies in existence today. In addition, the term, SRO, connoted a very lonely and cramped room, where its main purpose was to provide a place for its resident to sleep and eat. I imagined that very little community existed, if at all, in buildings that housed single resident occupancies.

I was proven wrong by the case of the International Hotel. These men were family, despite their lonely quarters and solitude. I remember watching the movie “Fall of the I-Hotel,” and seeing how the manongs decorated their rooms. The style was very quaint and homely. I realized that the saying “home is where the heart is” was very true and poignant. A house was simply a dwelling, whereas a home was a place where you felt most comfortable and in tune with yourself. The manongs took what life threw at them and created safe havens for their memories and cultures. They bonded together in their solitude and loneliness without their wives and children, forming relationships that ran deeper than simple friendship. Their past and present linked them together and their pain was shared amongst each other.

I was amazed at the vitality and passion that these men had, especially when it came to their eviction. I do not typically envision old men as being able to rally troops to their call immediately, and I definitely do not imagine them participating in protests and demonstrations. There was one photograph in the Manilatown archives that our class sifted through that particularly stood out to me. It was a demonstration, with an old Asian man standing at the forefront of the crowd in a hat, holding up a sign with the words “No Eviction.” The reason why this particular photograph was so poignant to me was because it helped me realize how much their homes meant to them. These men sacrificed their health, energy, and time to protest the eviction because they truly valued their homes.

I ceased to think of single resident occupancies as only dwellings and cramped rooms, but as homes. If the housing was horrible and unbearable, the people would not have cared as much as they did. In spite of the uncomfortable living conditions, the manongs were able to carve out their own niches in society, their own homes.

While these past two instances have evoked feelings and empathy in me, they were both from an academic standpoint. The service work, however, helped me realize the importance of single resident occupancies and the International Hotel specifically. During the karaoke night for the seniors where we were supposed to help set up the equipment but ended up being late because of traffic, a few of the seniors that resided in the International Hotel came out to indulge in some Chinese karaoke. The image of elderly people singing along and swaying to archaic music is endearing enough without also sending me an important message. These people were tied together not just because of ethnicity, culturally and historically as well. Their history was what brought them to America—to escape oppression and dare to dream of a better life for themselves and their children. Their culture was what brought them together to form ethnic enclaves such as

Chinatown, Japantown, or Manilatown. Because of this cultural bonding, a community was formed.

The manongs from the Philippines immigrated here from their homeland in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families. What they found instead was a difficult life. They were discriminated against with miscegenation laws that prevented them from taking wives of other ethnicities while Filipino women were banned from immigrating to America because of immigration laws. The discrimination, hatred, and resentment that they faced stemmed from a misunderstanding of their heritage and determination. They bonded together in the face of this injustice and created supportive communities where they congregated and, most importantly, LIVED.

I thought about how the senior residents lived together. They lived without their children, without financial or emotional support. They dealt with their problems on their own, forgoing the help of their sons and daughters. I recall on many occasions seeing the residents walk into the hotel with their groceries in hand, mounting the stairs toward their rooms. Their strength and perseverance still amazes me. In spite of their old age and loneliness, they pushed forward, doing what they had to do to continue living.

At the same time, I was saddened by my recollections. I remember the first day that our class visited the Manilatown Foundation Center. I remember seeing the seniors sitting around on the fold-up chairs in the lobby of the center. They were conversing with each other, and the cacophony of voices displayed to the sense of worry and stress. They were crowded around two people that looked as if they had taken on all the stress of the seniors. The seniors anxiously waited their turn to ask questions. We then discovered that the reason why the center was so crowded on that day was because it was the deadline to turn in housing applications for senior housing. It all made sense now. Their worried faces took on more meaning for me, even though I could not understand the language that they were mumbling in. I was sad that they had to worry about this factor in life, once again without their children to help them or lead the way. I imagined my grandparents who live in the house that my uncle had bought for them. While they had to worry about their health, maintaining the house, and caring for the family, I realized that these seniors had to do all that and more. I was saddened at the prospect that these seniors had this worry on their plate, and a very significant one at that.

However, I realized something else at the same time. By being able to live together in an area like Chinatown or in a place like the International Hotel, they were able to share their experiences and help each other out through hard times.. They all had the same worries, but by being able to live in close proximity to each other, they were able to cope.

Had the manongs not lived together in the International Hotel at the time, I imagined their lives to be infinitely more difficult. If they were scattered throughout San Francisco in different single resident occupancies and in different hotels during the time of immense urbanization, I doubt that they would have been able to mobilize themselves as readily as they did, as demonstrated by the detailing of the history by Estella Habal in her book on the International Hotel. It was because their eviction was a concerted movement that affected such a large population of manongs, elderly Filipino men that had lived a long, hard life without any solace in any hope of a family. It is no wonder why the eviction of the manongs drew such large crowds to their demonstrations and rallies. No matter how small and uncomfortable those homes may have been, they were

still their homes, where they formed friendships, had conversations, and built community in the hallways of the I-Hotel. These men were able to relive the times and the culture of the Philippines. The single resident occupancies of the International Hotel were not just housing, but homes, and the manongs were entitled to call those SRO's their homes.

**Turning Resilience Into Art:  
Class Mobility and Mestiza Survivalism in Nick Joaquin's  
*The Woman Who Had Two Navels***

Johaina Crisostomo

**INTRODUCTION**

**A Problematic Nation**

**T**he Philippines is a difficult homeland to love, yet it has remained an obsession of mine since childhood, spurred by a patriotic fervor that runs in my blood. I wanted to study this nation that seemed always on the verge of collapsing—a country with a history fractured by multiple colonialisms, a present beleaguered by an identity crisis, and a future ruptured by expatriation.

Initially, I thought about writing my thesis on *Noli Me Tangere* until I was confronted with the fact that Rizal wrote in Spanish. The text that first inspired the formation of Philippine national consciousness—that first instigated a sense of “imagined community” among the disparate tribes of this vast archipelago—now struck me as alienating. The realization made me rethink my idea of “Filipino Literature.” This body of work I thought could enlighten me on the question of national identity is not even written in the same tongue.

I encountered *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* in a published symposium on “The Filipino Novel,”<sup>4</sup> and was intrigued when three of the four critics pointed to this text as being a promising candidate for “The Great Filipino Novel.” Nick Joaquin’s national allegory struck me as the challenge I had been looking for all along. Unable to extract the answers from Rizal, I turned my attention on Joaquin.

*The Woman Who Had Two Navels* in the Context of the History of the Filipino Novel

Filipinos did not start writing novels in English until 1921, when Zoilo M. Galang wrote *A Child of Sorrow*, four years after Nick Joaquin was born in 1917.<sup>5</sup> Galang, a veritable trailblazer for Filipino-Anglophone artists, wrote at a time when the Philippines was still a territory of the United States, only two decades into the learning and practice of English. Forty years later, Joaquin, now considered the greatest Anglophone writer of the Philippine post-war period,<sup>6</sup> published his debut novel to an independent nation.

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<sup>4</sup> *Literature At the Crossroads: 3 Symposia On the Filipino Novel, Filipino Poetry, the Filipino Theater* (Manila: A. S. Florentino, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph A. Galdon, “Romance and Realism: The Philippine Novel in English,” *Essays On the Philippine Novel In English*, ed. Joseph A. Galdon (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979) 22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Teodor M. Locsin’s introduction to the 1963 reprinting of Joaquin’s *Prose and Poems* begins with the statement: “Nick Joaquin, one might as well say it right at the start, is the first literary artist of the country. No Filipino now writing matches his stories in power and beauty...” Nick Joaquin, *Prose and Poems*, 2d ed. (Manila: A.S. Florentino, 1963) VII.

Joaquin belonged to a generation of artists and intellectuals who felt the estrangement of that sudden transition from Spanish to American rule, born at a time when Filipino writers were studying the feel of a language different from that which flowed through Rizal's pen. By the time he started publishing in the 1950s, English had replaced Spanish as the new lingua franca of the Philippines.<sup>7</sup> This disjunction caused by multiple colonialisms is very much present in Joaquin's novel. *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* could be seen as Joaquin's attempt at capturing the fractures and incongruities inherent in Philippine national formation and identity.

### Summary of *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*:

Because of the novel's allegorical form, it is difficult to recount a summary without projecting one's own interpretation of the plot. Nevertheless I provide a brief synopsis of the most significant events depicted in the narrative:

A group of five Filipino expatriates living in Hong Kong in the 1950s find their lives suddenly interrupted by a young woman from the Philippines—Connie Escobar—who claims to have two navels. She appears in Pepe Monson's office imploring his help, entangling him and his brother, Father Tony, in her dilemma. She accuses her mother of not loving her and exposes the corruption of her politician father. Connie's mother, Concha Vidal, shows up in Pepe's office after Connie leaves and dismisses her daughter's stories as lies. She asks Pepe to help her convince Connie to come back to Manila. Yet as more of Connie's history unravels, the brothers find out that her husband, Macho Escobar, is actually her mother's old lover, and that the marriage was arranged by Concha, herself, thinking she could save both of them by giving them to each other. It is the knowledge of this past that makes Connie run away.

Connie's "awakening" is presented as a surrealistic sequence in which, driving her car up to Father Tony's monastery where she intends to go to confession, she lapses into three reveries where she severs ties with her husband, her father, and finally, her mother. The chapter ends with an attempted suicide that she, herself, thwarts. Macho discovers the remnants of the car crash and, believing Connie dead, blames himself for her suicide. Guilt-ridden, he kills both Concha Vidal and himself, ending the novel.

### Connie and Concha: The Contrasting Nature of Two *Mestizas*

I read *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* as a feminist text in its configuration of the emerging Filipino consciousness as the struggle inherent in the constitution of the *mestiza*. This thesis attempts to explore the different ways in which Concha and Connie negotiate their *mestiza* identity in reaction to the turbulence of multiple colonialisms and the beginning of Philippine national formation. These two female protagonists share an unrelenting tenacity to live through the chaos of their times. Renowned Filipino critic, E. San Juan, Jr., mentions this resilience but does not make a distinction between the different types of resilience manifested by these two women.<sup>8</sup> Analyzing the different

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<sup>7</sup> Resil B. Mojares, *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel: a Generic Study of the Novel Until 1940* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1983) 264.

<sup>8</sup> E. San Juan, Jr., *Subversions of Desire: Prolegomena to Nick Joaquin* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988) 165.

ways in which Concha and Connie negotiate their *mestiza* identity will provide insights into the racial formation of the Filipino as a hybrid subject. San Juan, Jr. and other critics who have written on the novel fail to explicitly mention mixed race and postcolonialism as a way to understand the text.

In also giving a Marxist reading, I follow the tradition started by such critics as George Lukacs, Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams.<sup>9</sup> Chapter one will focus on an analysis of the socio-historical forces shaping the world of Concha Vidal's childhood towards the end of the nineteenth century. By examining the historical conditions in which she lived, I intend to demonstrate how the colonial power structure of Spanish Philippines affects her understanding of gender, race and personal agency. I argue that Concha's vanity, criticized by the Monson brothers as an incurable flaw of her personality, is the behavioral reaction to an underlying fear of compromised social mobility. In a world in which power is inextricable from race, Concha gains leverage by capitalizing on her resemblance to the Spaniard. She recognizes her beauty—that is, her closeness to the full-blooded European ideal—as a way to acquire an advantageous marriage and preserve her place among the ranks of the elite. The problem with this kind of resilience is that it propagates the self-commodification of the *mestiza* as a work of art; her face becomes the passive canvas on which European constructions of beauty are maintained and projected, and through which the Spaniard can effect authority in absentia. This phenomenon locks her further into the structural systems of oppression that use the *mestizo* to uphold the superiority of the Spanish colonizer.

Chapter two will focus on the nature of Connie's resilience and how she functions as a possible resolution to her mother's objectification as a colonized *mestiza*. Instead of turning her into a congealed aesthetic, Connie's resilience embodies a dynamic phenomenon that foregrounds the role of *mestiza* as a revolutionary artist. Connie is able to cast a critical eye on her surroundings, forcing others to confront the questions surrounding their own hybridity through fictional stories and subversive actions. She has the ability to make people believe in things that do not exist, as epitomized by the imagined two-navels dilemma. By weaving narratives that foreground the social construction—the myth-making process—inherent in the fashioning of the *mestiza*, she acquires the transformative capacity of the artist, likening her to Joaquin. Connie exercises authority over her own person by resisting others' attempts to codify her personality into one coherent identity. While Concha's vanity is the behavioral manifestation of an underlying fear of social decline, Connie's proclivity for storytelling reveals the efforts of a mind trying to decolonize itself.

In studying the different ways in which Concha and Connie negotiate their *mestiza* identity, we gain insights into the larger questions of hybridity that complicate the Filipino condition.

### CHAPTER ONE

#### **La Vidal: the *Mestiza* as a Colonial Work of Art**

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<sup>9</sup> György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies In Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1971); Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1976); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

### Concha as the Virgin Icon: Beauty, Commodity and Art

In a society highly preoccupied with images, where power is told in a person's visage, beauty becomes an important source of social and political leverage. Concha's beauty is much discussed by the other characters in the narrative, and becomes a defining characteristic of her *mestiza* personhood. Since beauty cannot exist outside of a cultural context, the colonial power structure inflects the term to mean a specifically *Spanish* kind of likeness. In relating her first impressions of the two Vidal women, Mary Texeira emphasizes Concha's approximation to this European ideal: "It's the mother that's the real beauty—dead-white skin and dead-black hair and a glitter of ornaments—like one of those jeweled Madonnas in Spanish churches" (25). Here, Concha becomes transformed into one of the religious icons she and her family make a show of worshipping. Phrases like "dead-white skin" and "dead-black hair" that highlight the power she acquires from resembling the colonizer also hint at a paralyzing objectification that turns her into a work of art—complete with a price tag attached. The rest of Texeira's description exposes the mercantile value of her appearance: Concha is bedecked with a "glitter of ornaments" and is ultimately compared to a "jeweled Madonna."

Locked in this description of Concha's visage is the fundamental curse of the *mestiza*. Implicit in Mary Texeira's remark is the idea that in carrying the looks of the Spaniard, Concha also becomes subject to the dehumanizing characteristic of commodity. This condition reflects Wickberg's argument about the *mestizos* benefitting from their colonizers only insofar as they lend themselves to exploitation. Her *mestiza* beauty—her resemblance to the Spaniard that allows her to be in a position of privilege—becomes the idolized image that upholds the authority of Spain.

Concha's pale face becomes a kind of double-edged sword, simultaneously empowering and defeating. Already used to the advantages of being at the top, she finds herself struggling to remain in her place. Vanity becomes the behavioral manifestation of this obsession with power. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng writes about the desire for racialized beauty in the Asian-American context, though one could extend the same argument in the Filipino context given the country's history with the United States. Cheng writes:

Thus the mastery and assumption of female beauty by a nonwhite woman must also announce her remoteness from the norm of beauty, which is white female beauty. Indeed, beauty continuously provokes the negotiation of the distance between ideal and self...[Beauty's] logic not only echoes but expedites the logic of racial ideas: a demand for approximation that enunciates the simultaneity of desire and impossibility.<sup>10</sup>

The women most haunted by this racial melancholia are those closest to the European ideal. In being likened to the Spaniard, Concha is reminded of the unattainableness of this paradigmatic purity by the hybridity inherent in *mestiza* identity.

Concha's representation as a commodified Virgin icon continues into Chapter Two, though in a more subtle extent. This time, it comes through Macho's perspective,

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001) 55.

when he wakes up to find Concha sitting next to him in an old church in Intramuros: “Macho sank down on a bench beside a kneeling woman shrouded in a large blue shawl, and immediately fell asleep. He was awakened by a tugging at his ear and opened his eyes to rainbow light from a gothic window staining the face of the senora de Vidal (105-106).” Concha is depicted as another representation of the Virgin, this time wearing a blue shawl over her head with the added drama of light coming in from the stained-glass windows. From the inflexibility of an icon, she now appears like a painted portrait. Yet the fact that she is again perceived as a work of art highlights the passivity of her stance. It suggests that the mystifying hold she exercises over Macho, appearing as she does in all her saintly glory, is derivative. Concha Vidal’s power does not originate from herself, but is bestowed upon her by the ghost of the full-blooded Spaniard her face evokes.

### Acting Out Her Part

From the ceremonies observed in front of the family altar, the text shifts to another, more explicit site of performance—that of the native theater.<sup>11</sup> The transition from one scene to the other turns on a description of Manila on the night fifteen-year-old Concha meets her first husband, Esteban Borromeo. Joaquin’s portrayal of the city presents Manila as a stage, and Concha, the heroine of its play:

This was on an April night in the 1900s, the early period of the American occupation, when Manila was still a compact, rather decayed little town of lamplight and fine carriages, of red-tiled roofs and murky streets and canals, of mustachioed men in straw hats and white coats that buttoned all the way up to the throat, and of women with great coils of hair on their heads and an elaborate attire—billowy skirts with trains, fussy neckpieces, sheer blouses with wide sleeves arching over the shoulders like transparent wings.

Into such a costume the little Conchita Gil had just grown up, and with it, that April night, she wore her mother’s brilliants, a pink shawl with white tassels, and a look of fearful joy—for she was going to the theater... (162).

In this passage, Manila is distanced from the reader as background scenery is distanced from the theatrical spectator. The city appears as a miniature—“a compact, rather decayed little town”—adorned by the details of a hastily drawn sketch. Immediately following this description of locale is an introduction to the general character that could be found walking along its streets. Costume takes on primary significance, as men and women are defined not in terms of conduct or personality, but through apparel. This writing style recalls the Spanish tradition of costumbrismo, which is characterized by short literary sketches of everyday life.<sup>12</sup> Joaquin uses an old colonial way of writing to

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<sup>11</sup> Joaquin’s experience with theater included working as a stagehand at a local theater and later as a stage manager for his sister-in-law’s acting troupe; Abad.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Iarocci, “Romantic Prose, Journalism, and Costumbrismo,” *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. David Thatcher Gies (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

describe this transitional moment in Philippine history when the first Philippine Republic finds itself again at the mercy of a new conqueror. In effect, this moment emphasizes the oppressive recurrence of colonization in the nation's history. Moreover, by portraying Manila as a kind of theater—more specifically, as a theater fashioned from the perspective of a Spanish literary tradition—the text emphasizes Concha's role as the mixed-race actress acting out her part to uphold the colonial hierarchy. As suggested in the passage, all she had to do to get into her costume was “grow up,” showing how she has been cast into the role of *mestiza* by being born at a specific intersectionality of gender, race and class. The performance about to be debuted is not in the incendiary theatrics of the native theater, but in something more covert (and perhaps more potent because of its discretion)—a woman's face in which the power struggle between colonizer and colonized is daily enacted and displayed.

Instead of Borromeo's play, it is really the fifteen-year-old Concha that makes a debut in this passage. A “debut” in the Hispanicized Filipino context means a ceremonial right-of-passage in which a young woman is introduced to society to indicate her readiness for marriage. The following scene embodies as a kind of premature “debut” for Concha—it represents the moment in which she realizes her agency as a young woman about to navigate through the oppressive environs of her patriarchal society:

Tonight was the real growing up—not that night of her first flowers, not the day she first put up her hair... Over hot chocolate and fried rice and eggs in the kitchen, she spied on her parents, intent for the first time in what they said, and the way they looked at each other, as though they spoke a secret language she had just deciphered. She went to her room and glanced disdainfully at her two younger sisters sleeping, then saw herself in a mirror, poised winged in the dark, the brilliants gleaming in her hair (166).

It is at this moment in the narrative that Concha recognizes her beauty as a potential source of leverage. She undergoes a kind of epiphany when she looks in the mirror and is met by an ethereal creature “poised winged in the dark.” It is almost as if she is being lifted off the page, as this newfound ammunition puts her in relative superiority to her sleeping sisters. They do not seem to acquire the same empowering knowledge she has gleaned from her reflection, and end up becoming spinsters in their adulthood. Unlike them, Concha knows how to read the visual cues that come her way and uses them to her advantage. As described in the passage, she decodes the “secret language” of attraction by observing the way her parents “looked at each other.” What allows Concha to be adaptive in this patriarchal regime is her ability to navigate through this complex system of visual cues and understand her capital in the racialized language of power and beauty. Yet the problem remains that her “debut” into this society—the moment she realizes her agency as a grown woman—is stunted by the larger structures of oppression that prevent her from conceiving a more productive kind of resilience that does not entail her self-commodification.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Connie Escobar: the *Mestiza* as Revolutionary Artist

The mother-daughter duality of Connie and Concha typify different forms of *mestiza* resilience in Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*. Concha's adaptive strategy is predicated on her ability to represent herself as a kind of commodified aesthetic—a human work of art—that capitalizes on her resemblance to the European conqueror. Connie's resilience embodies a more subversive form of *mestiza* survivalism borne out of a capacity to imagine revolutionary alternatives to the problematic racial formation she inherits from these oppressive colonialisms.

From the moment she is introduced into the novel, Connie Escobar takes on the role of the critic. She questions everything and forces others to reevaluate their most deeply ingrained beliefs. This role of critic reveals an individual who sees herself as a citizen with political leverage, capable of reforming the society in which she lives. In an effort to reimagine the *mestiza* as a decolonized subject of an independent nation, she weaves narratives that reformulate history, culture, and identity in her own terms. Her capacity for reinvention grants her the creative potency of the artist, likening her figure to that of Joaquin. What becomes interpreted by others as a sign of pathology—this irresistible urge to spread “lies”—is actually an attempt to foreground the myth-making process inherent in the racial formation of the *mestiza*, allowing her to circumvent the systems of oppression that objectified other colonial subjects, such as Concha.

#### Connie's Debut

The novel opens with a conversation between Pepe Monson and Connie Escobar—a conversation that exhibits a reversal of the power structure displayed in the courtship scene between Concha and Manolo:

When she told him she had two navels he believed her at once; she seemed so urgently, so desperately serious—and besides, what would be the point in telling a lie like that, he asked himself, while she asked him if he could help her, if he could arrange “something surgical,” an operation.

“But I'm only a horse-doctor,” he apologized: to which she retorted that, well, if he could fix up horses...And she cried that it was urgent: her whole life depended on it.

He inquired how old she was, and noting—while she replied that she was thirty—how her eyes turned cagey for the first time since she came into the room he wondered, putting on his spectacles, if she might be knocking off a few years, but could not tell, for the stylized face with the black hat pulled low over it recorded no time in years, only in hours (1-2).

One of the most peculiar things about this interaction is the credibility that Pepe readily ascribes to Connie. Under her persistence and the strength of her conviction, Pepe is made to admit the impossible into the realm of truth, even taking it upon himself to defend its veracity to the reader. Connie's authority is further revealed in the style of Joaquin's prose. The sentence structure reveals an intertwining of the two characters' consciousnesses that puts them on a more level plane than Concha and Manolo. Unlike

Concha, Connie exhibits no wary detachment from her interlocutor—on the contrary, she pushes her views on Pepe with unrestrained vehemence and urgency.

Ironically, in spite of this closeness, Connie proves more difficult to read. Pepe cannot scrutinize her because she projects an image of herself that is elusive at best, frustrating all attempts to formulate any qualifying judgments about her. Even with the help of his spectacles—again, suggestive of this desire to “read” into the other person’s visage—Pepe discovers he could measure Connie “only in *hours*.” Moreover, the reader does not get any information about specific features, save for one striking detail about a “black hat pulled low” over her face—the fact that her identity is hidden. Unlike Concha, Connie does not flaunt her face, but presents herself in a more covert and ambiguous manner. Just as physical beauty becomes central to our understanding of Concha Vidal’s character, so this elusiveness becomes a defining characteristic of Connie Escobar’s persona.

Concha later reveals to Pepe that her daughter is only eighteen at this point in the narrative—the traditional age at which young Filipinas celebrate their ceremonial “debut.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike the novel’s depiction of Conchita’s debut in which the budding adolescent enters Manila as an actress acknowledging her role, Connie bursts into the scene as the artist questioning just exactly what this role might be and resisting others’ attempts to script it for her. Pepe’s inability to assess her suggests the success of this resistance against external codification. If we think of Connie’s character as attempting to reimagine the decolonized *mestiza*, the indefinableness of her visage suggests the preliminary “clearing out” process that needs to take place before any creative reformulation can happen. Before she can reconfigure her identity in her own terms, she has to let the inherited formulation of the *mestiza* disintegrate from her face.

In contrast, Pepe’s first impression of Concha emphasizes La Vidal’s relative immobility: “She [Concha] was smaller than her daughter, more neatly a piece—as though scissored entirely from a style page” (9). Concha is perceived as a static photograph derived from a fashion magazine, suggesting that she lends herself too easily to reading. This description falls in line with her adaptive strategies being primarily founded on visual capital. In frustrating all attempts to be read by others, however, Connie takes back the agency lost in her mother’s objectification, and uses this influence as her first ammunition towards decolonization.

### Connie as the Critical Inquisitor

Connie’s role as a critical protagonist becomes fully exposed at the end of her conversation with Pepe. Though she opens the narrative seeking Pepe Monson’s help on her two-naveled plight, she ends up turning the tables on him and making *his* identity the center of discussion. In this manner, it is he who ultimately becomes the object being scrutinized—a reversal of the power structure in Manolo’s courtship of Concha. When Pepe wonders why Connie decides to leave the Philippines to seek his help in Hong Kong, Connie replies:

“I thought I would look you up. Besides, you’re a fellow countryman.  
You are, aren’t you?”

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<sup>13</sup> Joaquin 9.

“My father is a Filipino, and so was my mother. I suppose I am, too, though I was born over here and have never been over there.”

“Did you never want to go?”

“Oh most awfully. I wanted to study there but my father wouldn’t let me...”

“Why wouldn’t your father let you?”

“He was in the revolution against Spain and in the resistance against the Americans, and when both uprisings failed he came and settled here and swore not to go home, neither himself nor his sons, until it was a free country again.”

“Well it is now.”

“And he did go back, last year. But he didn’t stay long...”

“But why wouldn’t he stay? Was he frightened?” (7-8)

This interaction resembles an interrogation more than a conversational exchange. Instead of being at the receiving end of his baffled queries, Connie now holds the more authoritative position as inquisitor, asking Pepe questions that force him to confront his own conception of national identity. It is as if Connie’s main reason for going all the way to Hong Kong is not to get answers to her own identity crisis, but to force Pepe to grapple with his. As mentioned in the previous chapter on Concha, La Vidal goes through a similar kind of self-examination when she studies her face in the mirror after Manolo’s courtly calls. Yet compared to her mother’s self-evaluation, Connie’s interaction with Pepe, though apparently self-referential, is ultimately not self-serving. Her two-naveled dilemma is but an individual projection of an underlying national crisis of the multiplicity in origin points. The confusion she expresses over a bodily mutation becomes the conceit of the entire novel, foregrounding her role as the intellectual artist attempting to articulate her concerns through a fanciful recreation. Connie possesses a curious, questioning mind—a mind showing the first signs of its own decolonization, awakened to the danger of falling into the same passive nature that undermined her mother’s adaptive strategy as a colonized *mestiza*.

### Connie as a Critic Through Action

Just as Concha’s history offers an explanation to her vanity, so Connie’s past offers an explanation to her subversive tendency. At their first meeting, Concha gives Pepe an account of her daughter’s running away from home, saying that she refused to be educated on “stolen money.” In relaying this flashback, Concha attributes her daughter’s reaction to the influence of newspaper headlines tinged with the Communist ideologies of the Hukbalahap insurgents.<sup>14</sup> Unlike her mother, Connie grows up in a commonwealth on its way to gaining independence, thereby making her aware of the fact that she belongs to something larger than her immediate *mestizo* elite sector. This growing cognizance of a national affiliation is fueled by the increased circulation of periodicals in Manila—a

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<sup>14</sup> The Communist Party of the Philippines organized a military force in 1942 called “Hukbalahap” to fight the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II.

condition Anderson distinguishes as key in the formation of national consciousness.<sup>15</sup> Here, the critical nature of Connie-as-interrogator is still preserved, but manifested in a more direct, action- as opposed to language-driven performance, where she forces others to confront a social malady by transforming herself into a figuration of the problem. :

She went off—but not to school—simply disappeared. For a week we had the police looking for her. They finally found her, working as dishwasher in a chop suey joint in the Chinese quarter...The Chinese were screaming all over the place: they had heard what an important man my husband is and the panic had spread through the neighborhood. When I arrived the police had to club at the crowds to let my car pass through and when I stepped out at the chop suey joint the Chinese who owned it came rushing out and began whining and groveling at my feet. They looked awful: the police had been beating them up and their heads were bloody. I was taken to the kitchen, and there sat my poor Connie, on a stool, in the center of the room with the entire police department massed around her.

She was wearing a repulsive dress that she had bought at some market and she had painted her face and had had her hair cut very short...On the way home I said nothing and she said nothing. I had not kissed her nor taken her hand; I wouldn't touch her; I wanted her to feel my fury—but she seemed to feel nothing, sitting there with her hands folded on her lap and her painted face a blank and that repulsive dress making her look like a cheap taxi-dancer on a dull night (22-23).

This flashback reveals a Connie that has changed her façade to serve a political project, pushing forth the image of “Concha-as-actress” to a more literal—and simultaneously more critical—level. Connie’s project looks to achieve the opposite of what her mother had taken on in her childhood. For Connie, growing up in the embryonic stages of Philippine national formation, these racial and class-based segregations become the problem of a collective—not of disparate tribes or foreign settlers. As Connie sees herself a problematic figure in this collective, she feels the obligation of the citizen to heal the rifts tearing apart the body politic. That is, instead of capitalizing on her resemblance to the colonizer to retain a privileged class standing, Connie likens herself to the oppressed in order to question the validity of this inherited establishment. Here, the difference between these two women’s understanding of the role of *mestiza* shines through: while one is operating on a visual plane, the other functions at a more metaphysical level.

These different modes of communication alienate mother from daughter, as seen in the impregnable silence of the car ride home. Concha cannot get through Connie’s shell because what she has been trained to understand is the language of façades: “She [Connie] seemed to feel nothing, sitting there with her hands folded on her lap and her painted face a blank.” Connie is presented as an empty receptacle devoid of thought and emotion, with no expressions to clue the reader into the state of her interiority. The hands folded on her lap evoke the sense of a polite dumbness, casting a distinctly doll-like aura to her persona. Concha’s perception of the problem is founded on a mismatch of appearances—Connie is not supposed to look like “a cheap taxi-dancer on a dull night.”

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<sup>15</sup> Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006) 33-36.

Yet Connie transforms her appearance, not to turn herself into a piece of aesthetic, but to present a revolutionary alternative to her situation.

As a postcolonial subject working towards the decolonization of her mind, Connie faces a crisis her mother did not encounter in her own formative years. In order to retain her social standing within the patriarchal framework of the colonial hierarchy, Concha merely had to understand the currency of the *mestiza* as a work of art—that is, as a beauty acquiring its power from the authority of the colonizer it resembles. The oppressive conditions in which she grew up blinded her from seeing the possibility of circumventing this objectification—of conceiving the role of the *mestiza* as the artist imagining her own identity, instead of being the passive canvas on which this European notion of attractiveness is projected. As an adult citizen in an autonomous nation, Connie represents the once-silent *mestiza* now revealing the social construction of her mixed-race identity. The story of her two navels is her way of making explicit what has hitherto been left unspoken. She forces others to grapple with the contradictions and incongruities inherent in their Filipino heritage, and to realize the unfeasibility of absolute ways of thinking about identity. In the nature of her character, one sees the beginnings of a resolution for the *mestiza* subject, with the owning of the mind pushed forth as the ultimate decolonizing project.

## **The Validity of Diagnosing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnamese American Refugees**

Tina Duong

### **Introduction**

Posttraumatic stress disorder, otherwise known as PTSD, has recently been increasingly diagnosed in Vietnamese American populations, especially those who were a part of the second wave of refugees- the boat people. PTSD has arisen in history in various forms and has been linked more to war veterans rather than civilians. This homogenizing of experiences is problematic, especially taking into consideration the various traumatic circumstances the Vietnamese refugees had to face and how culturally they differ from Westerners. Although Vietnamese Americans underutilize mental health services, it does not necessarily mean that they do not need these facilities, but rather it is because cultural factors prevent them from taking advantage of such resources (Nguyen 2005:214). PTSD and all other mental illnesses are highly stigmatized in Vietnamese culture, so diagnosing patients with PTSD basically brands them as “crazy” within the community. To avoid such discouraging predicaments and to disband the stigmas associated with mental health and illnesses in Vietnamese American communities, it is necessary for doctors and psychiatrists to provide culturally sensitive treatments in which patients are not labeled with “PTSD,” but are instead looked at as individuals who are not only tormented by their past experiences, but suffer from both somatic and acculturation problems and need to be educated in order to be more aware about mental illnesses and mental health services.

### **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

#### *Diagnosis*

Posttraumatic stress disorder is defined as “an emotional illness that usually develops as a result of a terribly frightening, life-threatening, or otherwise highly unsafe experience” (Dryden- Edwards). Symptoms include re-experiencing the traumatic event, the avoidance of people, places, and events that remind the patient of the trauma, and the increased sensitivity to normal life experiences such as having trouble concentrating. To be diagnosed with PTSD, one must have at least one re-experiencing symptom, three avoidance/ numbing symptoms, and two hyperarousal symptoms for at least a month and these symptoms must cause “significant” distress or functional impairment (Dryden-Edwards). These criteria are very much Western-based, specifically centered on Western (especially white) war veterans, and they are not accurate in determining “PTSD” in Vietnamese refugees.

PTSD has revolved around war veterans’ distress after fighting in wars, but the recurrent patterns of distress does not necessarily mean that PTSD is the same for war veterans as it is for the Vietnamese American refugees. PTSD was not officially a diagnosis until twenty years ago in 1980. During each war, it was always under the guise

of a different term. According to Dryden-Edwards, during the American Civil War, PTSD was known as “soldier’s heart.” It was called “combat fatigue” in World War I, “gross stress reaction” in World War II, and initially known as the “post-Vietnam syndrome” after the end of the Vietnam War (Dryden-Edwards). It has also been known as “battle fatigue” and “shell shock”—terms which are very intertwined with the act of fighting in a war. Although the Vietnamese American refugees witnessed similar atrocities that the war veterans did, some who even fought for South Vietnam, there are additional components that complicate their situation and problematize the use of the term “PTSD”. It is more difficult to recognize and diagnose Vietnamese Americans suffering from PTSD because Western concepts of illness and diagnosis do not readily apply to these Vietnamese Americans, especially since mental illness in general is not a tangible concept for them.

### ***PTSD and Somatization in Vietnamese Americans***

In a study conducted in two primary care clinics by Silove et al., approximately fifteen percent of the Vietnamese patients were diagnosed with PTSD. This rate, however, does not properly express the high rate of Vietnamese Americans who are still haunted by their past experiences during the escape from Vietnam. Many patients come into the doctor’s office complaining about sleep problems (i.e. insomnia, recurring nightmares, and intrusive thoughts), anorexia and weight loss, loss of memory and concentration, headaches, and suicidal thoughts or attempts (Flaskerud and Nguyen 1988: 435). This act of somatization is a common idiom for Vietnamese Americans to express depression and other psychological problems. Depression and PTSD are thus thought of in completely different terms than the Westernized view of feeling sad or down (Hsu et al. 2004). General practitioners tend to then direct these patients to mental health providers because these somatic complaints do not really have an organic cause. This baffles many patients since they gathered up their courage to go to the doctor’s only to be told that the doctor cannot “fix” them. The doctors, in turn, fail to understand what the patients have experienced in the past and why they feel so wary about seeking mental health care and being diagnosed with something such as PTSD.

### **The Vietnamese American Refugee Experience**

Life in Vietnam for many refugees was not bright at all. During the war, many witnessed their relatives and friends being killed in camps or in fields. Those who were sent to the so-called re-education camps suffered from being detained in unsafe, overcrowded, and poorly sanitized environments. The camps were in the middle of nowhere, and these men were indefinitely separated from their families for reason that they could not really comprehend. Those who “freely” walked the streets watched as their homeland was bombed and polluted with debris. Houses were burned down and it became increasingly harder to survive. Suddenly, Vietnam was no longer home.

After the Fall of Saigon, life within the communist country became so unbearable that millions decided to risk their lives and flee by boat in the middle of the night. This forced migration augmented the refugees’ sense of loss of control and fear of the unknown circumstances that was ahead of them; however the hope for a chance of

freedom and peace was worth putting their futures on the line. Guards would patrol the waters like lions on a hunt, taking down whatever ships they caught drifting away from the shores. Many of the lucky boats that made it far away enough from the guards ended up drifting aimlessly without a functional motor or map. The boats were packed with dozens of people and very little food and water. Some boat people traveled weeks without any sustenance before their boat reached land. Others were the target of Thai pirates that lurked the waters. Numerous refugees were raped, robbed, tortured, kidnapped and/or killed by the pirates. There was not just one single incident that could be pinpointed out as a traumatic stressor. The boat people witnessed too many deaths and made so many sacrifices only to face more problems in a completely foreign land.

Coming to America, where freedom supposedly rings from sea to shining sea, was an automatic decision for many of the refugees. Little did they know, many would experience difficulty living and acculturating in their new homes and did not know who or where to turn to for guidance. According to a Washington State study, fifty to seventy percent of Vietnamese American refugees did not know how to get services like legal help, free emergency medical care, English classes, free emergency food, or low-income housing (Gold 1992: 292). Growing up in a patriarchal society, many Vietnamese American men and elders were at a loss when roles became reversed; women could more easily obtain domestic jobs and children, who learned English quickly, became the guides to navigating society (Hsu et al. 2004). Many lived in poverty when first coming here, since they had to build their lives up from scratch in a new land where people spoke in a different language and had a completely different culture.

It is understandable that these Vietnamese American refugees would have undergone so many stressors that they have begun to develop mental illnesses. The fact that many of them are unseen, however, is troubling. At the same time, it is a challenging situation because Vietnamese American culture, itself, is not very accepting of mental illnesses.

### **Vietnamese Views on Mental Health and Illness**

PTSD is much more difficult to bring up in Vietnamese Americans compared to white Americans, especially because of the cultural differences and stigmas that have been engrained in Vietnamese society. Many cultural nuances have shaped the negative way Vietnamese Americans tend to view any mental illness, regardless if it's PTSD or depression. The problem is that doctors and psychiatrists are usually not well versed in these details and do not realize how sensitive of a topic PTSD to a Vietnamese American patient is and end up addressing it without taking into consideration the patient's culture and history.

### ***Stigma and Face***

Being diagnosed with PTSD is almost like a social death sentence for the patient as well as his or her family. Vietnamese people tend to correlate every mental health-related issue with being "crazy." There is little meaningful conceptual difference between insanity and psychological problems. Much of this is due to the fact that in Vietnam, mental illness was always associated with institutionalization and imprisonment

(Fancher 2009). The diagnosis of any mental illness is thought to be due to poor moral character, spiritual weakness, and/or improper upbringing by the family (Fancher 2009). Thus, PTSD is not a problem of the individual by him/ herself, but it reflects negatively on the patient's family and ancestors (Nguyen 2005: 215). Because of this way of thinking, many prospective patients are too afraid to bring shame to or dishonor their families by seeking medical treatment for mental problems like PTSD. They fear being rejected by the community and possibly even from their own families. It therefore, would take a lot of courage to go see the psychiatrist.

### ***Traditional Beliefs***

The Vietnamese tend to rely on traditional methods before consulting Western healthcare providers because they believe that all illnesses are because of metaphysical imbalances. Remedies such as cupping and coining are commonly used in addition to herbal medicine. Although from a biomedical standpoint, many of these remedies such as Eagle Oil and Tiger Balm are effective in healing, they do bring peace of mind to the Vietnamese Americans who trust in their abilities.

In addition, as mentioned previously, mental problems tend to be presented as physical problems. Patients will seek medical service from primary physicians and expect medication for the pain or problem to go away. They do not expect to be directed to mental health service providers, especially because it might be offensive and very unexpected. It will not be uncommon for patients to be dissatisfied because the doctor did not prescribe any medications in response to their complaints.

### ***Attitudes Towards Seeking Help***

In addition to having faith in traditional healing, many Vietnamese Americans do not seek Western medical care because they do not believe that it is of utmost importance if the pain and symptoms are tolerable. In regards to mental health, Vietnamese Americans are even more discouraged to seek help from doctors and psychiatrists. Emotional and psychological problems are viewed as less serious and not as immediate as physical ones. Regardless of this prioritization, the social stigmas surrounding mental illness are big deterring factors within themselves.

In a study of Vietnamese Americans' attitudes towards seeking mental health services, Quang Nguyen and Louis Anderson found that if push came to shove, the Vietnamese Americans would still rely on community resources like priests, Buddhist monks, or traditional healers to treat their psychological problems (2005: 215). Additionally, "until severe abnormality is observed, many Vietnamese individuals may tend to explain (and discuss) the behavior as some type of personality quirk, rather than recognize it as a problem that should or could be treated by professional services" (Nguyen and Anderson 2005:228). The idea of having a mental illness is mind-boggling. It's even more complicated because there is not even a word in Vietnamese for "depression" (Naurt 2008). If depression does not even really exist in Vietnamese, how can PTSD be explained in such a way that patients are not afraid? For patients to be more comfortable seeking mental health services and overcome their fears that arise from preconceived notions, culturally competent doctors are needed.

## **Cultural Competent Treatment**

To better serve and address the mental health needs of the growing Vietnamese American population, a culturally competent model must be taken in consideration and community outreach needs to become more prevalent. With the stronger doctor-patient relationships that arise from this, patients will feel more comfortable seeking both mental and physical health care. In addition, the stigmas surrounding mental illnesses will slowly dismantle like it has been doing in the broader American society. Ideas from the models presented in Tran et al. and Flaskerud and Nguyen's reports on cross-cultural competent medical care for Vietnamese Americans were adopted to form the following plan of treatment attended to effectively address the medical health needs within the Vietnamese American refugees recovering from the traumatic experiences they have faced.

### ***Educating the Vietnamese Americans***

Many of the stigmas concerning mental health are spouted from past experiences in Vietnam. In order to help the community overcome these stigmas, people need to become more educated about what mental illnesses actually are and how to actually utilize U.S. mental health services. With more education and empowerment, there will be fewer misconceptions about mental health and mental illness, which in turn will encourage patients to more readily seek help instead of waiting until they feel like there are no other options. In primary care clinics serving Vietnamese Americans, there should be pamphlets of information in the Vietnamese language about mental illnesses and should be centered around the somatic symptoms rather than blatantly stating that they deal emotional disorders.

### ***Developing Stronger Doctor-Patient Relationships***

In a study conducted comparing satisfaction rates of different mental health services, Vietnamese refugees tended to express greater satisfaction when they were treated in specialized treatment facilities for refugees than the ones who turned to mainstream services for help (Silove et al 1997:1068). At these specialized clinics, patients noted that the therapists seemed to care more about the patients. The information provided tended to be very thorough and straightforward, and treatments were useful and easily negotiable, fostering better communication and increased trust between the therapist and the patient. The bicultural model utilized at this clinic needs to be adopted by the mainstream clinics, especially since not many specialized clinics are available or known by patients.

In this model, the patient-doctor relationship plays one of the most vital roles. Visits should not be hurried or obtrusive, which helps the patient feel more welcome and comfortable with talking about themselves. Although they are strained on time, the psychiatrists or doctors should actually get to know their patients (about their life in Vietnam, their experiences when escaping and at refugee camps, as well as about their current circumstances). Smiling and being kind is a good way show patients that they are in good hands and that their concerns are the doctor's and psychiatrist's concerns.

Small gestures like changing the way one phrases questions can make patients feel more comfortable talking. Being straightforward rather than vague is more effective in understanding the Vietnamese patient better (Gold 1992:293). For example, questions like “How do you hurt?” or “Where do you hurt?” should be asked rather than “How do you feel?” One must draw answers out of the patient rather than wait for the patient to suddenly unload his or her life story. Also, reassuring the patients that they are not “crazy” because they have PTSD or suffer from mental illnesses and perhaps mentioning that they are more like “survivors” will help the patients feel more empowered and less helpless about their situations.

### ***Removing Culture and Language Barriers***

To facilitate an effective relationship between doctor and patient, the culture and language barriers that might divide them must be taken down. In order to do this, interpretation services need to be available for the patient to utilize. Having the interpreter around will also help the doctor understand cultural mannerisms like how he or she should be sitting in order to not make the patient feel inferior.

In addition, interpretation should always be done through actual interpreters rather than the patient’s family members or friends. The use of family or friends can become problematic not only because of the sensitivity of the information being discussed, but also because the flow of communication can be hindered by the family member or friend’s opinions. When having an interpreter present, it does not mean that the patient is no longer really there. Doctors should remember to keep eye contact with the patient and make them feel included in the conversation.

### ***Negotiation Medication***

When addressing patient history, doctors need to realize that patients might be using alternative forms of medicine simultaneously with the prescribed medications. Doctors need to ask their patients if they are using any herbal remedies to make sure that they do not cause any side effect when in combination with the prescribed medication. If patients prefer to still use alternative medicine, doctors should facilitate negotiations, ensuring that the patient will more likely comply to taking the prescriptions.

When it comes to compliancy, doctors need to make sure that their patients are taking the medications as directed. If not, doctors are responsible for figuring out why the patient is wary of taking the drugs. Vietnamese Americans tend to believe that they can endure less medication than white Americans since Western medicine works very rapidly, but has many side effects. To address this worry, doctors can prescribe lower dosages and slowly increase the dosage so that the patients do not feel overwhelmed.

### ***Addressing Social Functioning and Family Roles***

Vietnamese American families tend to play a collective role when it comes to receiving medical care. As Silove et al. state, “the family is intricately involved in any problem that befalls the individual in the Vietnamese community” (1997: 1065). If patients agree to allow their family member’s involvement, doctors and psychiatrists are

encouraged to do so. It is necessary to identify the patient's role in the family and how PTSD affects everyone within the family. Understanding the family structure and the patients worry will enable physicians to better comprehend the patient's actions, and engaging the family to help the patient will make the patient feel less stigmatized and alone. This cooperation with family members will also enable the physician to encounter fewer obstacles when ensuring patient compliancy.

To make sure that treatments do not affect the patient's social functioning, it is suggested that short blocks of time (10-15 minutes) be incorporated between appointments so that patients do not have to worry about having someone they know see them. The fear of being judged by others within the community and possibly speaking badly of the family would dishearten the patient and possibly lead to the premature ending of treatment.

### ***Not Letting Diagnosis Overcome Treatment of Symptoms***

It is important to remember that many Vietnamese American patients come into the doctor's office thinking they are suffering from physical pains, not symptoms due to PTSD. Even though doctors might be readily able to pinpoint the cause of complaints as PTSD, they should explore the somatic complaints first and slowly draw out the emotional ones in order to prevent the patient from thinking that the doctor believes that he or she is crazy. To the Vietnamese Americans, the term PTSD has no real meaning except for that it is a mental illness. There are not real lines that divide each mental illness; in a sense, everything is homogenized into one big category. The lack of need for knowing implies just that. It is not necessary to obsess over diagnosing a patient with PTSD. The patient is there to be treated for somatic complaints, not emotional ones. If these somatic complaints can be slowly treated, the trust the patient has for the doctor will be strengthened, and over time, the concept of having PTSD will be more easily accepted.

### ***Sensitive Vocabulary***

To have patients comfortable talking about PTSD in the first place, doctors must take great care in utilizing the right words and phrasing concepts in such a way that the patient is not scared off or discouraged. The use of sensitive vocabulary will also help the Vietnamese American patient understand better. For example, Fancher suggests using the words "feelings," "stress," and "giving up" instead of "mental illness," "depression," and "suicide." The use of common, everyday words will make the topic much more approachable. Doctors might believe these words dilute the severity of PTSD, but it is much more difficult for their patients to digest information when the concepts presented are not comprehensible to them.

### ***Addressing Acculturation Needs***

Despite being in the United States for an extended amount of time, Vietnamese Americans are still facing issues in society today. Many are still trying to adjust to life in the United States and the Westernized culture. Although doctors might not be able to directly help their patients in this regard, they can help direct patients to places where they can seek help. In addition to psychiatric help, these Vietnamese American patients

might require assistances with their daily living problems, such as finding adequate food, clothing, and shelter. They might also be financially unstable and still not proficient in English. Although it is a stretch, by addressing these issues and aiding the patient with their acculturation, physicians might be planting seeds that will help the patient slowly become more receptive to biomedical viewpoints as he or she becomes more Westernized.

### Conclusion

In Western culture, it is convenient to label everything so that it makes categorizing and organizing easier. This is especially true in regards to mental illnesses such as PTSD. What is the purpose of adhering to the diagnosis given by DSM IV when it does not necessarily become applicable in different cultures? What exactly does it mean to be diagnosed with PTSD in the Vietnamese American community, then?

The definition of PTSD is essentially very limited. PTSD is understood by many as a “soldier’s disease,” not something that is commonly linked to civilians like the Vietnamese American refugees. It seems to be limited to one traumatic event and does not take into consideration what happens when there is a culmination of events. It also assumes that the traumatic event occurred in the past and is not necessarily literally being continually experienced by the “victim” such as in cases when the Vietnamese Americans are still struggling to acculturate to American society.

PTSD is also difficult to explain to other communities which lack the vocabulary surrounding mental illnesses. In this capitalistic society, it might be good to categorize PTSD for the medical system and insurance, but PTSD is not a term that comes without negative preconceived connotations. These connotations will inevitably discourage patients and potentially outcast them, especially in the Vietnamese American community in which they would be deemed as “crazy.” Because of the stigmas ingrained within the Vietnamese American community, the term PTSD should *not* be used to diagnose the refugees suffering from the trauma they have experienced. The diagnosis should deal more with finding ways to heal the patients’ somaticized problems, which will in turn give them more peace of mind and help them slowly heal their mental injuries. This road to recovery and unlabelling will be possible with the incorporation and enforcement of cultural competency in the medical system. With this, patients will be more trusting of their doctors and doctors will be more understanding of their patients’ perspectives, allowing for more effective treatment to occur and the dissolving of fear of mental illness.

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**Constructing the “Chinaman:”**  
**Exploring Race and Masculinity in *Crash* and *Chickencoop***  
*Chinaman*  
Holly Fetter

In the “imagined community” of America, masculinity is conflated with whiteness.<sup>16</sup> The white man is constructed as the “best possible man, the masculine ideal, the apex of civilization, [and] the greatest achievement of human evolution, progress, and history,” while men of color are deemed improperly masculine—or, in the case of Asian American men, inadequately masculine.<sup>17</sup> Frank Chin, playwright and author, writes that, “The white stereotype of the Asian is unique in that it is the only racial stereotype devoid of manhood.”<sup>18</sup> Both the 2004 film *Crash* and Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman* involve the construction and perception of Asian American masculinity in the American imagination. Paul Haggis’ *Crash* presents a problematic portrayal of Asian American men as emasculated villains, a representation that is challenged by Tam Lum, the protagonist of Frank Chin’s play. Both texts illuminate the importance of language and self-narration in the construction of an empowered self—although Haggis excludes his Asian and Asian American characters from the dominant androcentric narratives and renders them practically voiceless throughout the film, Chin creates the potential for an agentic Asian American masculinity by divorcing Tam from his dependence on the black vernacular and connecting him to the stories of his male ancestors.

*Crash* is an extremely androcentric film, one that revolves around the narratives of eight men of various racial identities in Los Angeles. However, there is no Asian or Asian American man represented as one of these dominant characters. This problematic representation (and lack thereof) is particularly visible in the last seven minutes of the film. There is a montage throughout which the main characters (all male) are seen peering through windows, suggesting that they are reflecting on the important lessons they have learned by interacting with people of other racial backgrounds. This moment is a redemptive one for these men—a soft, beautiful song plays over slow pans and dissolve transitions while the viewer gets the sense that there is a great deal of healing and growth happening in this series of shots. Juxtapose this montage, then, with the penultimate scene of the film, in which one character lets the “Chinamen” (a group of ethnically vague Asians who have been sold to the evil Korean trafficker) out of the back of a van, releasing them into Chinatown, where he assumes they will be content once they find some “chop suey.” This scene contains a series of shots of disoriented men, women, and children peering at things on the street, highlighting the foreignness of these Asian

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<sup>16</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>18</sup> David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 93.

characters. And then, the Asian male gets his own contemplative close-up—he is shown staring at a shop window, looking totally bewildered and helpless. The blatant exclusion of Asian American men from the main narratives suggests that they are not “manly” enough to handle the tough issues of race relations in L.A., and that their only place in the film is as a collective foil for the strong, brave non-Asian men.

Moreover, while other men are given heroic scenes of redemption throughout the film, Asian and Asian American men are portrayed as villains, further reinforcing the “Yellow Peril” trope.<sup>19</sup> The depiction of the Asian man as menacing and predatory is certainly active in *Crash*, as the only two Asian men with dialogue are a man who trafficks Asian bodies and an insurance agent who embodies the insensitivity of capitalist America. The other Asian characters in the film are uncommonly passive and weak—they are a voiceless mass of unidentified humans in the back of an unmarked van, and are literally carried through the film at the behest of other characters. They are not even given the chance to self-identify, and are referred to as “Chinamen,” “Thai,” and “Cambodian.” Even the ethnic identities of the Asian traffickers are imposed upon them—one character repeatedly refers to them as “Chinamen” though they are clearly Korean, a decision that Haggis explains in his commentary: “We cast two Korean people and then decided to call them ‘Chinamen,’ because that’s what you do in the U.S.”<sup>20</sup>

This severe lack of narrative agency is only reinforced by the fact that the Asian characters are given limited access to language. There are two Asian American males that speak, one in Korean and another in English. Both characters are given minimal lines, and only talk about painful subjects—the former character speaks only of trafficking, while the latter’s speech reflects corporate insensitivity. The other Asian characters, the ones relegated to the back of an unmarked van, do not speak at all. Their inability to speak reflects their inability to be recognized in the imagined American community, one that denies Asian and Asian American men the agency they deserve.

In Frank Chin’s *Chickencoop Chinaman*, the protagonist, Tam Lum, harbors much anxiety about his identity. Toward the beginning of the text, he explains his origin to an apparitional Hong Kong Dream Girl: “Chinamen are made, not born... Out of junk-imports, lies, railroad scrap iron, dirty jokes, broken bottles, cigar smoke, Cosquilla Indian blood, wino spit, and lots of milk on amnesia.”<sup>21</sup> From his words, we learn that he has been fashioned by others’ perceptions of him, and that this notion of Asian American manhood as constructed from various cultural debris inform his limited sense of self. He is insecure about his Asian identity, his American identity, and his masculine identity, and this internal instability is manifested in the language through which Tam expresses himself throughout the play. Before he continues to tell the Dream Girl his tales of being a “Chinaman,” the stage directions inform the reader that “Tam goes through voice and accent changes. From W.C. Fields to American Midwest, Bible Belt holy roller, etc. His own ‘normal’ speech jumps between black and white rhythms and accents.”<sup>22</sup> Tam’s lack of an authentic language with which to self-narrate represents the linguistic plight of

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<sup>19</sup> Hemant Shah, “‘Asian Culture’ and Asian American Identities in the Television and Film Industries of the United States,” *SIMILE: Studies In Media & Information Literacy Education* 3, no. 3 (2003), accessed November 29, 2010, <http://utpjournals.metapress.com/content/6765421383187752/>.

<sup>20</sup> *Crash*, dir. Paul Haggis (Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2004), DVD.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman and The Year of the Dragon: Two Plays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, 6.

Asian Americans—in Frank Chin’s words, they are nothing more than “ventriloquists’ dummies,” forced to develop unique methods of communication.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Tam is known as “Tampax,” a nickname that evokes femininity and refers to the way in which his “Chinatong acka-cent” renders him a “mumbler, a squeaker,” unable to articulate his identity.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the play, Tam relies on black vernacular to express himself. His speech is rife with the kind of grammatical “errors” and slang typical to African American Vernacular English. Historically, black men have been perceived as hypermasculine, while Asian men are seen as the least masculine and white men serve as the norm.<sup>25</sup> Through his use of black language, Tam appropriates the hypermasculinity of the black man to compensate for his severe lack of phallic power. Chin explains his use of black vernacular in this play:

...Unlike the blacks, [Asian Americans] have neither an articulated, organic sense of our American identity nor the verbal confidence and self-esteem to talk one up from our experience. As a people, we are pre-verbal—afraid of language as the instrument through which the monster takes possession of us. For us American-born, both the Asian languages and the English language are foreign. We are a people without a native tongue. To whites, we’re all foreigners, still learning English...And to Asians born to Asian culture...our Chinese and Japanese is a fake.<sup>26</sup>

This quote reflects the anxiety that Asian Americans, specifically Asian American men, experience regarding their supposedly inadequate identities. As neither entirely American nor entirely Asian, and neither entirely masculine nor entirely feminine, they exist in a liminal space. Chin sees the use of black vernacular as a way of countering and escaping this paradoxical situation—if Asian American men could successfully appropriate the “positive, self-defined linguistic identity” of black men, they might then challenge the perception of themselves as foreign and emasculated.<sup>27</sup>

However, this appropriation of the black vernacular is problematic—it essentializes blackness (reflected in Chin’s use of the phrase “the blacks”), reinforces stereotypes, and fails to acknowledge that privilege and power are not a reality for all black American men—and it ultimately fails to provide Tam with a viable means through which to express himself. When he visits Popcorn, the man he regards as the ideal father figure, his identity is not validated—his “blackness” is read as inauthentic. Popcorn and Tam have a long, circuitous dialogue in which the latter attempts to answer one question: “Why would a Chinese talk like a colored man?”<sup>28</sup> Tam later admits that his performance of blackness is “a goddamned minstrel show,” illuminating his realization that the struggle to create a stable identity for himself cannot be won simply through a misguided

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<sup>23</sup> Frank Chin, “Backtalk,” in *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, ed. Emma Gee (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California, 1976), 557.

<sup>24</sup> Chin, *The Chicken Coop Chinaman*, 11, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Fung, “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge, 1996), 181-2.

<sup>26</sup> Chin, “Backtalk,” 557.

<sup>27</sup> Chin, “Backtalk,” 557.

<sup>28</sup> Chin, *The Chicken Coop Chinaman*, 40.

use of black vernacular.<sup>29</sup> It is also during this scene that Tam's lack of masculinity is most evident. First, Popcorn calls Tam a "queer," highlighting his deviation from American norms of masculinity.<sup>30</sup> Then, when challenged to fight Popcorn, he loses instantly. After Tam attempts to strike the old man but misses, he falls over and ends up on the floor, laughing about how he is the "Chickencoop Chinaman," whose "punch won't crack an egg."<sup>31</sup> This scene illustrates the uselessness of Tam's linguistic appropriation—talking like a black man fails to reinforce his own masculinity, and instead leaves him defeated and laughing on the floor of a "porno movie house."

Tam's masculinity is finally affirmed in the final scene of the play. Although he is cooking in the kitchen, typically a site of femininity and domesticity, he is reminded of his "grandmaw" and his male ancestors. He remembers his grandmother telling a tale of her father during the days "when Chinamans were the only electricity and all the thunder in the mountains"—back when Chinese men could assert their unpretentious, authentic manhood through their hard labor and heroic work.<sup>32</sup> He recalls his grandmother's story of

when her father came back from the granite face and was put in the next room, broken and frostbit on every finger and toe of him and his ears and nose, from the granite face, by Chinamans, nobodies' fathers, all night long running stolen horses, yelling for speed, for my grandmaw's ma. That's the truth!<sup>33</sup>

Tam rediscovers his masculinity through the memory of his heroic past—he realizes the need to appreciate stories of his Asian male ancestors instead of appropriating the relationship of Popcorn and his son Ovaltine as a replacement for his inadequate relationship with his own father. Through connecting his own narrative to that of his male lineage, he is able to "express [himself] in the simplest form [of manhood], that of fathers and sons."<sup>34</sup> By recalling the history and stories of Chinese America that valorize Asian American masculinity, Tam performatively speaks toward a future in which Chinese American men will no longer be passively constructed by a racist American notion of Asian American men as foreign and effeminate, but will have the agency to create themselves and tell their own tales of bravery. Although Tam's language does not change dramatically in this final scene, there is hope that he will find a new, authentic way to speak through the inspiration of his grandmother's voice. The fact that it is the memory of his grandmother that triggers his apparent revelation almost forgives the sexism of the rest of the play because it is a woman who influences Tam's journey toward an authentic, agentic process of self-narration.

Both *Crash* and *Chickencoop Chinaman* contribute to the construction of a generalized Asian identity in the American imagination. The former is an unproductive text because of the way in which it blatantly fails to validate Asian American narratives and notions of masculinity. *Crash* is also a dangerous text because of its popularity—

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<sup>29</sup> Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Chin, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Chin et al., eds., *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (New York: Mentor, 1991), xlvi.

winner of three Oscars at the 2005 Academy Awards, its unabashed exclusion of Asian Americans from the central plot and problematic employment of the “Yellow Peril” trope seems to have gone unnoticed by the general public. The voiceless, villainous Asian men of this film risk being immortalized as the dominant representation of Asian men in the popular American imagination. *Chickencoop Chinaman* is not a perfect text either—the homophobic, sexist, and essentialist writing of Frank Chin is extremely problematic, and does little to affirm the identities of Asian American women. However, it is valuable in that it counters the silence and powerlessness of Asian Americans that remains unchallenged in texts like *Crash*. The end of the play underlines the importance of language and self-narration in constructing an empowered self—both for the protagonist, Tam Lum, and the writer, Frank Chin. In the introduction to *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, Chin and his fellow editors write of this collection of works: “Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is...our whole voice.”<sup>35</sup> Through the development of Tam Lum, we see the evolution of his powerful vocal resistance against the dominant culture that continually castrates and undervalues him. We also see a reflection of Frank Chin himself, as he uses this text to explore and proclaim the struggles of the Asian American male, finally speaking toward a future of empowerment through a reclamation of the valiant past of Asian male ancestors. While *Crash* further emasculates and disempowers Asian American characters, *Chickencoop Chinaman* provides the possibility of a revival of strong, positive masculine identities for Asian men in America.

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<sup>35</sup> Jeffery Paul Chan et al., eds., *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Meridan, 1991), xi.

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