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ESSAYS
MY FAIR LADY

Ken Savage

For his senior honors thesis in the department of Theater and Performance Studies, Ken Savage ‘14 produced and directed an Asian re-imagination of the classic Broadway musical My Fair Lady in Bing Concert Hall on January 31, 2014. The production served as the case study for his honors thesis on the the Asian body in musical theater and how the narratives of the British Asian and immigrant experience in 1912 Edwardian London re-invigorate the story with questions of race and representation. Below is his director’s note from the production which provided audiences with an overview of the production process.

My Fair Lady is about belonging. Adapted from George Bernard Shaw’s play Pygmalion, Lerner and Loewe’s My Fair Lady tells the story of Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl, with dreams beyond her life in in the London lower class. Eliza re-invents herself in order to achieve the life of diamonds, chocolates, and taxis she dreams of and to find a sense of belonging in Edwardian London wherein the rigid class system bars social mobility from class to class. Eliza is the exception. With the help of Professor Henry Higgins, a social misfit of the British upper class, Eliza changes the way she speaks and transforms herself into a proper British lady— but at what cost?

When I first encountered My Fair Lady I strongly identified with Eliza’s struggles. Growing up in an Asian American household in San Francisco, I remember learning how to speak “proper” English and act like a gentleman. I faced the same dilemma of leaving a cultural past only to adopt a new, “better” one. My Fair Lady read as an immigrant story, a minority’s dream, and as my biography.

In the musical, Higgins exclaims in the opening scene, “Why can’t the English learn to speak?” I can’t count all of the times I’ve heard a variation of this lyric from friends and peers referring to an Asian professor, TA, parent, or friend who spoke in broken English or a heavy accent. I am guilty of this as well. Though the same can be said for other minorities of color, I strongly believe that no group is criticized or mocked more for lack of perfect English speech than the Asian community. As someone who speaks English without an Asian accent, I feel I have transcended language barriers and entered a class of Asians that is treated differently because of my speech. Language is privilege. Higgins continues with the lyrics, “An Englishman’s way of speaking absolutely classifies him.” Listening to this line, I can’t help but think of how language creates intra-racial class distinctions within the Asian community and in general all people. Language is a marker of belonging. With this reading of My Fair Lady as an Asian American story, I sought out to direct a production that would address issues of Asian re-invention as a means of social elevation.

A year and a half ago, Asia and I had a serendipitous conversation about my newfound interest in wanting to do an Asian-inspired production of My Fair Lady. She immediately jumped on the project, saying it was her favorite musical and urging me to pursue it with her as the designer. We decided to re-imagine My Fair Lady and use the frame of this classic Broadway musical to reclaim it for the Asian community and to tell our story. Our vision was to create a production that celebrated this invisible Asian community in London.
in 1912 and use My Fair Lady to discuss race, class, and language.

Our research began with careful analyses of both Pygmalion and My Fair Lady. We were shocked when re-reading both texts to see references to dressing up Eliza in a Japanese kimono and sending for her Chinese fan. When watching Pygmalion starring Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller, we noticed Oriental statues and blue and white porcelain vases sprinkled throughout Higgins’ study. The most exciting nugget of research was discovering that when adapting Pygmalion into My Fair Lady, Lerner and Loewe originally wanted to set the opening scene in “the smoky atmosphere of Thomas Burke’s Limehouse—Chinese sailors, swells who have come slumming” rather than in Convent Garden (Loverly: The Life and Times of My Fair Lady by Dominic McHugh). Burke’s Limehouse Nights perpetuated the Asian stereotype of the slant-eyed, demonic, opium-smoking Chinese men, which was a negative depiction that vilified Asians in popular media. Though Orientalism is not specifically addressed in the story of My Fair Lady, Asian culture was celebrated in the visual aesthetic of Edwardian London.

Our research also led us to London, where we spent two weeks at the beginning of the summer in archives, museums, and in each of the specific scene locations hoping to learn more about the world of Eliza Doolittle, Henry Higgins, and the invisible Asian community. The Asian community in Edwardian London, though small, was a vibrant community that thrived together in an era of severe marginalization in a predominantly white British society. The Asian community was extremely polarized. At one end of the social spectrum, the Asian underworld of sailors, tradesmen, domestic servants, and new immigrants flocked together, forming strong Asian sub-communities in the Limehouse shipping district in London. On the other end, wealthy expatriate families predominantly from China, Japan, and India made up the other end of the spectrum. The Asian-expatriate elite came to London with the primary goal of receiving a Western education and assimilating into the British upper class. In our production, Eliza Doolittle and Henry Higgins exist at the polar extremes of this spectrum.

This production is not meant to replicate the conditions of the Asian community in Edwardian London. We were inspired by history and art to create our own production that challenges audiences to expand their knowledge and understanding of London, Asian culture, and musical theater in general. We have decided to preserve the distinction between Cockney and Received Pronunciation (RP) and the story remains the same. But our My Fair Lady is different. Our Asian Henry Higgins takes in our Asian Eliza Doolittle as the two strive to overcome social expectations and find their own sense of belonging in this world. I hope that our production allows all of us to explore what belonging means to us and how we find our sense of belonging in our various communities.
Reclaiming the Filipino Novel: Cultural Aestheticism in Jessica Hagedorn’s “Dogeaters”

Debra Tisoy Pacio

Consider the colorful design of the Philippines’ iconic jeepney and the flashy execution of Filipino game shows, trademarks of culture not solely of the Philippines, but still cultural derivations formed by a long history of colonial influences. The Tagalog phrase that would properly describe this aesthetic phenomenon is “halo halo,” or “mix-mix,” a name best known for the popular Filipino dessert. The name describes its distinct mixture of ingredients that varies in a multitude of color, flavor, and texture. Representative of the nature of Filipino identity and history, the concept of the “halo halo” stands as a significant cultural aesthetic that has found its way into the realm of literature, as seen in the use of bricolage, pastiche, polyphony, and all sorts of cultural layering in Jessica Hagedorn’s novel Dogeaters.

This mass use of imitation and mezcla, however, calls into question the issue of cultural authenticity and literature’s complicit propagation of an oppressive colonial presence in standard Filipino culture. Bienvenido Lumbera, keynote lecturer at the 1994 Iligan National Writers’ Workshop, asked his audience to “ponder the ways by which a Westernized academe had determined the norms by which the canon of Philippine literature has been constructed” (Hidalgo 2). Cultural influences from hundreds of years of European, American, and Japanese imperial rule have unavoidably contributed to various features of Filipino literature. Today, Filipino authors face the artistic controversy in the originality of Filipino literary poetics. Style is a constant point of contention for Filipino authors who find themselves questioning the cultural legitimacy of their work and whether it accepts or resists these colonial influences.

Literary critic Epifanio de San Juan, however, points out that this problem is not solely limited to the Filipino people. He observes a general stylistic response in postcolonial literature of “compensat[ing] for subalternity of people of color by eulogizing their ‘hybrid,’ ‘in-between,’ decentered situation” (7). While Hagedorn does indeed utilize techniques that elaborate on the hybridity of Philippine society, her particular aesthetic takes a unique approach in the function of these techniques. Her cultural aesthetic of mixture and crossings seeks to reclaim the Filipino novel by providing a more progressive lens upon its history and people. On the contrary, E. San Juan would disagree with any notion of stylistic innovation on Hagedorn’s part, asserting that “[i]n trying to extract some intelligible meaning out of the fragmentation of the comprador-patriarchal order […] Hagedorn resorts to pastiche, aleatory montage of diverse styles, clichés, ersatz rituals […] a parodic bricolage of western high postmodernism” (9-10). He denounces her work as overly typical, claiming little differentiation between her novel and novels of her fellow postmodernist novelists who employ similar techniques. He deems Dogeaters as a “cinematext of a Third World scenario that might be the Philippines or any other contemporary neocolonial milieu processed in the transnational laboratories of Los Angeles or New York” (8). While E. San Juan rightfully points out that there are indeed commonalities in the colonial experience, he generalizes and oversimplifies these histories and assumes absolute limitations to the ways they can be told. Hagedorn’s stylistic elements in Dogeaters are not simply a reproduction of literary trends, but perform inventive and imperative
functions that culminate in a unique and purposeful racial form.

This is not to say, however, that there is a specific formulation of aesthetics rightfully suited to represent the Filipino experience. Indeed, the diverse multitude of Hagedorn’s characters provides comprehensive representation of the varying experiences generated by circumstances of class, gender, family, employment, and ethnic background. In her examination of racial form, Colleen Lye posits that “there can be no such thing as an Asian American aesthetic form,” suggesting that not one form could encompass the whole of Asian American experiences (95), but argues that the conceptualization of a racial form “can help mediate the usual divide between the aesthetic and the social” (97). She draws a parallel between social constructions of race, using the umbrella term “Asian American” as an example, to the construction of race in literature. In both cases, the concept of race as a form provides a space for race to be understood as more than a historical abstraction. In this way, racial form bridges understandings of racial representations between literary and social formations. Colleen primarily draws upon Asian American literature as examples producing a unique form through aesthetic attributes that compliment and optimize its content. Likewise, Hagedorn is able to portray her own representation of the Filipino experience and best convey this experience to her readers through the formal aesthetic choices she makes in the novel.

One of the defining features of Dogeaters, is its unabashed use of bricolage, a cobbling and stitching together of diverse and disparate elements into one body of work. Most salient in this strategy is the combination of varying texts that Hagedorn implements. These include excerpts from the history text The Philippines (1846) by Jean Mallat, love letters, clips of news articles, fabrications of news articles, President William McKinley’s address, and screenplays for novellas, each emphatically stylized with a distinct typography and format. Complimenting this visual mixture is the cobbled make-up of her novel, consisting of a mezcla of characters, moods, and plot lines. These components overlap, collide, and interrupt one another in such a way that generally produces a confused effect upon audiences. By the end of the novel, readers may wonder what the central plot is, who the main character is, or whether there is an answer to either question in the first place. Professor Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo of the University of the Philippines attributes this to be one of the defining traits of Filipino novels. Hidalgo believes that this is “not to suggest these novels are sloppily or carelessly put together; rather that they are painted with bold strokes, with great verve, and dash, and daring” (59). Her research comes across this style in several landmark works of Philippine literature and traces the development of a unique cultural aesthetic and racial form through common features found in various literary genres.

Her investigation challenges the prevailing notion that this “wild, baroque mixture” originates from the marvelous realism associated with the Latin Americas. Based on Soledad Reyes’ application of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “carnival” and “carnivalesque,” Hidalgo observes that this “‘crazy mixture’ of serious devotion and fare, sublimity and earthiness, traditional and modern, earnestness and farce” are prevalent practices in everything from rites to rituals to what she believes to be the clearest demonstration of the aesthetic, comics (61). Hidalgo cites comics as an early form utilizing primarily marvelous elements. “Grafiction,” as she calls it, is an ideal medium for imaginative content because of its framework for possibility. In a separate essay, she discusses the significance of the kaleidoscopic style of Filipino folk tales and legends as a major influence
to today’s prominent literary aesthetics. Her research on Fabulists and Chroniclers refers back to Alfred A. Yuson’s novel, The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café, Hidalgo’s primary example of the carnivalesque. His novel utilizes “numerous time shifts, […] sections of interior monologue and sections of stream and consciousness. There is fantasy and parody. There is pastiche and bricolage” (69-70). Hagedorn’s own tactics of pastiche and bricolage are not uncommon to Filipino literature, but are characteristic and distinct features of a particular racial form. Appropriately depicted by a crude image of the female body on the Penguin publication cover, this stylistic stitching together of disparate elements provides an apt portrayal of the many cultural influences that now characterize Philippine culture and society.

Bricolage further serves as an apt tool for representing the diversity of the people of the Philippines within Dogeaters. In order to capture the vast population of the 7,000-island archipelago, Hagedorn incorporates characters from all levels of Philippine society, such as political figures (e.g., Senator Avila), movie stars (e.g., Lolita Luna) and the striving common people (e.g., Romeo Rosales). Her theme of mixture is embedded in the very character tropes she employs. Joey Sands straddles an in-between space as Dogeaters’s primary queer and mixed race character. Similarly, Rio represents a hybridity of cultural and national belonging as a 1.5 generation immigrant. Notably, the theme of cultural layering in Hagedorn’s novel is most prominently denoted by a heavy presence of tourism and travelers, pop culture, and language. Pauline Gardner Barber, a researcher on the modern-day female Overseas Filipino Worker, or OFW, observes that travel literature “valorizes the tourist, the cosmopolitan, and the expatriate, rather than the overseas worker or refugee” (50). Barber’s observation calls to attention the fact that while Hagedorn’s character set is diverse, it is also notably selective. The limelight falls upon those of elite and cosmopolitan backgrounds and barely acknowledges the individual identities of provincial natives. Setting, then, plays a key role in Hagedorn’s character representation, many of whom dwell in bustling cities, areas of cultural intermingling, rather than the remote countryside. The resulting aesthetic of crowding characters of elite and cosmopolitan backgrounds underscores the eclecticism of bodies that tourism generates in the Philippines and brings attention to the heavy colonial presence that remains in the Philippines today.

The very language of her piece, for example, is quite telling of the lasting impact that colonization has had upon Philippine culture. Hagedorn implements a mixture of Tagalog or English, namely “Taglish,” which continues to prevail as the primary mode of informal communication in the Philippines today. Pucha exemplifies this practice in her address to Rio in the penultimate chapter of the novel when she bluntly states, “You like to mix things up on purpose, di ba?” (Hagedorn 248). Although Filipino is said to be the official national language of the Philippines, English currently stands as the primary mode of instruction in schools as well as the primary language through which literature is written. Hidalgo refers to these texts as “Philippine literature in English” (2). The very name of this field of study suggests how deeply rooted American colonization is at the institutional level of the academe and beyond. In Hagedorn’s novel, the very opening scene begins with Pucha and Rio in the upper section of Manila’s “‘Foremost! First-Run! English Movies Only!’” theater (Hagedorn 3). The youth in particular struggle with contradicting cultures, as language plays a major role in cultural self-identification and formation. In his article, “Language, learning, identity, and privilege,” James Soriano, a student of Ateneo University, writes that “[f]or while Filipino may be the language of identity, it is the
language of the streets. It might have the capacity to be the language of learning, but it is not the language of the learned.” Many Filipino youth, particularly university students such as Soriano, have begun to publicly voice their preference for English over Tagalog. This is because the English language and education have come to be tools for social mobility in the Philippines, though one may argue, at the cost of native cultural preservation. Similarly, the question of language in literature has been a constant point of controversy because of the colonial influence that it is implicit in disseminating.

Over the years, much debate has occurred over whether Tagalog should regain its prominence or whether English should remain, particularly amongst Filipino writers. As an American publication, Dogeaters clearly caters to an American, English-speaking audience and has little to do with this debate. The use of switch tongues, however, exposes this predominant theme of cultural crossings in the novel at the level of language itself. Employing “Taglish” enables Hagedorn to provide a more authentic depiction of Philippine society and speech. With vestigial remnants of Tagalog floating in a sea of English-dominated conversation by Filipino characters, the switch codes serve to represent the ongoing conflict of linguistic dominancy. In the context of the broader linguistic debate, Hagedorn’s choice aligns more closely with the current preference for most Filipino writers, who deliberately employ bilingualism in their work. Hidalgo refers back to fiction writer, Jose Y. Dalisay Jr., who finds that “we [are] ‘witnessing the continuing de-Americanization of English, its appropriation by Filipino writers for Filipino subjects and purposes” (5). Capturing the vernacular of Philippine society allows Hagedorn to be an active participant in this debate as she utilizes a compromised language in the context of a novel that seeks to reclaim the colonized mind.

Characteristics of this colonial mentality are key to the cultural aesthetics that Hagedorn employs. Derived from the concept of the colonial consciousness, imitation serves as another prominent stylistic feature that Hagedorn utilizes in her novel. From the use of TruCola brands to white standards of beauty, Dogeaters paints a convincing portrayal of the American ideal that Filipinos seek out, whether consciously or unconsciously. Professor Renato Constantino of the University of the Philippines investigates the Filipino’s tendency for imitation, observing how “Filipino comics were only Filipino in language, and radios made American song hits available to the remotest barrios, not to speak of jingles advertising American and other foreign goods […] The Filipino had become largely imitative, seldom creative” (49). Renato notes how the effect of imitation upon these mediums provides ample space for an American presence in the public sphere. American products and creations set a particular standard to which the Philippines must either compete with, or replicate, to achieve positive reception and successful marketing. This imitative system self-propagates itself and has incorporated itself into Philippine culture and taste.

Imitation, however, does not necessarily confer absorption. In the context of Dogeaters, American role models are imitated, but are not always praised or understood. At times, they become subjects of satire and strangeness. While watching the American movie, All That Heaven Allows, Pucha and Rio “gasp at Gloria’s cool indifference, the offhand way she treats her grieving mother. Her casual arrogance seems inherently American, modern, and enviable” (3-4). Despite the admiration Pucha expresses for Gloria Talbott, she later laughs at the actress, saying, “She looks like a cat, aw-right […] but if you ask me, prima, Gloria Talbott looks like a trapo” (4). Pucha’s taste for American movies does not cloud her ability to see her favorite actress as a caricature in the movie. Far from idealizing
her, Pucha criticizes her to the surprise of her cousin, Rio, who admits to finding Gloria Talbott “interesting” (4). This hints at a degree of alienation from the actress or the movie’s themes, which readers later gain greater insight to we learn that Rio sneaks into her grandmother’s room to watch the classic Filipino radio serial, Love Letters. According to Rio’s father, “Love Letters appeals to the lowest common denominator” (11), yet it clearly has an appeal and absorptive quality for Rio. Rio shares a guilty pleasure in old Filipino stories of family and love with her grandmother, quite different from Gloria’s Talbott’s portrayal of women who disregard their mothers. There is a clashing of cultures between the films with one portraying a very American depiction of independence while the other presents a closer Filipino family dynamic. Rio is clearly drawn to Love Letters despite its lowbrow status for being a Filipino, rather than an American, storyline. The radio serial honors cultural values such as family and Filipino community spirit, or bayanihan, that she can better relate to. In this way, imitation is not always favored, particularly when at odds with the effectiveness of its absorptiveness to an audience of a different history and culture.

Besides these clear cultural markers, imitation, or pastiche, acquires an even more inventive function in the aesthetic choices that Hagedorn makes to reimagine modern day Philippine society. Although her novel contains factual clips published by the Associated Press (Hagedorn 187), Hagedorn creates her own news clips and distributes them throughout her novel. Some of these pieces offer themselves up as parodies of news, such as “Dateline: Manila by Cora Camacho,” embodying the prevalence of celebrity gossip and the lack of publication on more substantial current events (Hagedorn 169). Her other fictional news sources take steps further by forcing readers to consider the very integrity of Philippine news. Her article, “Floating Bodies” brings to light the discovery of decapitated bodies in the Makupit River, but is published in The Metro Manila Daily, which Hagedorn reveals to be fictional in her Author’s Note. Her use of a fake publication over an actual news article calls into question whether news on violent crimes and similar tragedies are as readily available to the public as celebrity gossip. The fabricated bulletins push readers to question the very legitimacy of the information provided, not only for its sources but also within the text itself.

Her use of pastiche begins to blur the lines between fact and fiction. Throughout the majority of Hagedorn’s novel, small-type font and narrower margins have served to indicate that a body of text is a news piece and not a part of the central narrative. The chapter, “The Famine of Dreams,” however, plays with the idea of imitation and parody by presenting Daisy’s captivity in news-formatting. The context of the chapter informs the readers that this is not an event that would be accessible to the public. Hagedorn describes how Colonel Jesus de Jesus “takes her on a brief tour as he leads her down the maze of corridors toward the General’s special interrogation room” (211), clearly a private headquarters inaccessible to any media outlets. The chapter switches between Hagedorn’s traditional small-font news format to her typical formatting of the story itself. The formatting for her narratives are now replaced by snippets of novellas and commercials, true fictions and manmade elevator speeches that only serve to reinforce the reality of Daisy’s experience. The use of parody enables the heightening of the brutality of the captivity and consequent rape scene. Because the formatting sets up the anticipation of news, the reader reads the scene as being entirely grounded in fact. Pastiche functions as a thought-provoking element in Dogeaters, calling into question the reader’s sense of reality by further challenging the legitimacy of the media while confronting the dire truth
The novel moves beyond representing a mock history to broaching the idea of misinformation, a prevalent issue in the Philippines today. This fictionalization is not only illustrated by misleading and questionable news sources, but the very theme of gossip that pervades Hagedorn’s novel. As General Ledesma says, “‘tsismis. I forget –this country thrives on misinformation’” (Hagedorn 175). Hagedorn’s character frequently engage in tsismis, or gossip, a practice prominently embedded in the social norms of Philippine culture. Although her characters’ backgrounds, relationships, and plot lines vary, gossip serves as the central cultural tie amongst her characters. Information, whether accurate or inaccurate, is constantly passed on. In this way, gossip carries a polyphonic connotation as an almost inherent social disease, but one that is propagated pleasurably. Gossip, then, serves as a mode of interconnecting individuals through the dispersion of information and opinion, effectively including all voices without discrimination.
Reflections on History Education

Van Anh Tran

My father’s eyes glaze over as he concludes another chapter of his tale of tragedy and adventure, of the journey of a man who crosses the Pacific to escape, of the end of one life amidst destruction to another of uncertainty. He thinks I am asleep as he quietly tucks me in and leaves my bedroom. My six-year-old imagination, however, is placing myself onto the boat of his story—the same kind that led to the salvation of many Vietnamese refugees and the demise of countless others—imagining how my small body would fit among those of the one hundred others in a vessel that could barely accommodate ten. These passengers do not know if they will ever set foot on land again and I am now one of them. I breathe in the sea air, but all I can smell is the vomit from sicknesses on board. I listen to the waves, but all I can hear is the sound of children crying. I try to move free, but I am stuck—caught between the terrified bodies of my neighbors. The underlying fear that we may die pulses throughout our bodies. Suppose we die this way. Pressed against one another. At least we would not die cold.

Many years later, I would find myself studying the Viet Nam War in my first American History course wondering whether the words on the page and the stories I had heard were describing the same event. The paragraph dedicated to the conflict did not capture the hours my father had spent carefully crafting his narrative in a way that would both be suitable for his young daughter and release the frustration of enduring traumatic loss—of country, of family, of self. The vivid descriptions of escape were not unique only to my father, but to the community of refugees in which I had been raised. The discrepancy between what I knew to be my community’s interpretation of the war and the legitimized objective version I found in my history textbooks caused me to question what I believed. Furthermore, I speculated whether their voices, pivotal to the conflict, were considered at all. I wanted to seek the truth and, more importantly, to see whether such a thing even existed.

History is an ever-changing and fluid process that we continually revise; multiple factors, such as geographical context, race, and class affect one’s interpretation of the past (and the present). Traditional history, however, memorializes the lives of great men and focuses on the political upheavals of and between nations. Our textbooks, accepted as fact and reinforced by various institutions, marginalize the perspectives of those in society who do not have the power to insert himself or herself in the historical record. My interest, academically and beyond, lies in cultivating an environment where we are able to critically think about the information that we receive, the events that have occurred, and how individual and systemic forces contributed to the processes and outcomes. With such tools, history education should encourage others to see the value in individual experiences and how these stories contribute immensely to history. Ultimately, such voices alter history and memory in a way that affects our society. As members of this larger community, it is imperative that we acknowledge all stories—especially those forgotten—fore they enrich our understanding of the past and present, of humanity, and of our shared experiences. Every now and again, I find myself back in that room where I would listen to my father’s stories. I see his eyes glaze over again. I had always assumed this was due to the events that he had tried to forget. I wonder, though, if this emotion surfaced due to the fact that those around him may have already forgotten.
External and Internal Forces Affecting the Construction and Deconstruction of Asian American Identity in Margaret Cho’s Stand Up Comedy

Yoo Jung Kim

Introduction

According to modern-day political science, the concept of hegemony—popularized by Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci—embodies a social theory thought to be crucial to the maintenance of the social and cultural status quo. As explained by Renate Holeb, the Director of International Studies at University of California Berkeley, “Hegemony is a concept that helps to explain, on the one hand, how state apparatuses, or political society—supported by a specific economic group—can coerce, […] the various strata of society into consenting to the status quo,” (Holeb). For any type of ideological coercion to be considered truly hegemonic, the group being coerced must internalize these ideas and concepts for themselves. Race provides an example of hegemony embodied in everyday life that many of us regularly affix upon ourselves and on others. For instance, a singular Asian American identity, like the geo-political landmass itself, is largely imaginary. Yet the myth of the Asian American identity persists through both external influences—“the specific economic group”—as well as its internal acceptance from those who consider themselves as Asian Americans—“the coerced”—who, in turn, also have a hand in the construction of their identity (Holeb). These external and internal powers both collude and compete to provide various multilayered and tenuous definitions of what it means to be Asian American and blur the line between authentic and inauthentic expressions of Asian American identities.

Korean American comedienne Margaret Cho demonstrates the complexity of the Asian American identity through live concert recordings of her two stand-up comedy tours—I’m the One that I Want and Notorious C.H.O. For her comedy acts, Margaret Cho draws heavily from her own life experiences as a minority of various sorts—as a woman, a person of color, a bisexual, and a person of size. But rather than choosing to solely affirm or deny the stereotypes associated with her labels, Cho chooses to do both. Cho’s numerous stand-up monologues in regards to her experience as an Asian American demonstrate the contradiction and ambiguities that abound within this racial label and casts doubt on the actuality of Asian American identity without downplaying its power upon reality. Cho complicates her viewers’ assumptions and understandings of the pan-Asian American identity, presenting it as a label that is dependent on both internal and external influences that can be adopted, adapted, constructed, deconstructed, and subverted through various means and intentions.

External Influences Affecting the Construction and Production of the Asian American Identity

The control over the construction of Asian American identity is not limited to those who identify themselves as such. External influences, especially those from mainstream American cultural productions, can also have a significant clout upon the production of Asian American identities. In Notorious C.H.O., Margaret Cho jokes about the dearth
of Asian American roles and actors in the television series and movies from her youth, stating, “I would dream, ‘maybe someday, I could be an extra on “M.A.S.H.”! Maybe someday, I could play Arnold’s girlfriend on “Happy Days!” Maybe I could play a hooker in something!!!’” (Cho). Through her comedic yarn, Cho implies that the limited scope of Asian American representation within mainstream cultural productions can normalize depictions of Asian Americans into specific social and cultural roles—such as that of the prostitute, the honor student, et cetera—that become internalized and manifest by the expectations and actions of Asian Americans themselves. Cho suggests that this hegemonic conception of race, while not rooted in actuality, has a tangible effect in reality.

The past and continuous lack of Asian American representation in media underscores the remarkableness of Margaret Cho’s short-lived prime-time T.V. sitcom, “All American Girl,” back in its inception in 1994. Yet in I’m the One that I Want, Margaret Cho provides a both comedic and sober exposé behind the hopeful creation and eventual termination of her sitcom that complicates assumptions of Asian American identity juxtaposed against mainstream American culture. In one monologue, Cho describes meeting a group of people “who did not understand the concept of Asian American” (Cho).

I went on a tour promoting the TV show to the country. And I went on a morning show, and the host was like, ‘Hey Margaret, we’re changing over to an ABC affiliate, so why don’t you tell the viewers, in your native language, we’re making that transition?’ So I looked at the camera, and I said, [in English] “They’re changing to an ABC affiliate.” (Cho)

The host’s faux pas betrays his/her false supposition that as an Asian American, Cho must speak a different “native” language from himself/herself. This type of stereotypical assumption demonstrates the depiction of Asian Americans as a non-“native,” alien population within the English-speaking America and the understanding of Asian American identity as one that is separate and distinct from mainstream American identity. Despite the implication that Cho’s eponymous Asian American character is “All American,” the host’s reaction to Margaret Cho implies that she would be considered anything but by mainstream American society, relegating the title of Cho’s situational comedy and her character’s titular description to the realm of irony.

In I’m the One that I Want, Cho describes another instance in which non-Asian-American powers exert influence over the perceived authenticity of the Asian American identity. In response to declining number of viewers and complaints from Asian American audiences, the studio declared, “[Margaret Cho’s] not Asian enough! She’s not testing Asian” (Cho). In an attempt to bolster their flagging ratings, the studio hired an Asian consultant for Cho, who sarcastically attributed the studio’s decision to the fact that “[she] was fucking it up so bad, they had to hire someone to help [her] become more Asian” (Cho).

As depicted in her stand-up comedy, the studio’s attempts to present Margaret Cho as a more authentic Asian American are laughable and demonstrate a mistaken belief in the existence of a single correct, authentic, and all-encompassing pan-Asian-American identity, rather than allowing for multiple racial iterations and truths (Thompson). In order to counter accusations of racism, the studio attempted to depict their own interpretation of an authentic Asian American family, despite the fact that the real racism laid in their expectation that such representation even existed at all (Thompson).

According to Margaret Cho, the studio’s attempts to make the cast of “All American Girl” more authentic led to mixed results. Cho stated, “The studio decided that America’s first
Asian American family was too Asian. So they fired all of the Asians except me and Amy Hill” (Cho). The studio’s subsequent efforts to resolve the perceived problem that the cast of “All American Girl” was “too Asian” demonstrate its desire to control “proper” media expression and production of Asian American identity to suit the tastes of its primarily white viewership (Cho). This second attempt to impose its control over depictions of Asian American identity demonstrates a mainstream effort to define what is sufficiently Asian American, despite the inherently vague definition of Asian American identity. The studio’s efforts to represent an authentic Korean American family could only be doomed to failure because, “no show can single-handedly carry the burdens of an entire community,” let alone the entire Asian American community (Chung).

Internal Influences Affecting the Construction and Production of the Asian American Identity

More than seventeen years following the cancellation of “All American Girl,” Asian American representation in conventional media — such as television and film — remains sparse. Given their small numbers and lack of representation in mainstream cultural productions, Asian Americans have sought to express the legitimacy of their own culture and gather political clout by collectively identifying themselves under a singular pan-ethnic and pan-cultural umbrella. Therefore, the responsibility over the continued persistence of the myth of the pan-Asian American identity cannot solely lie upon external influences; Asian Americans themselves perpetuate the myth of their cultural and racial solidarity by identifying with it and actively influencing its definitions.

Margaret Cho’s comedy also affirms Asian Americans’ influence on the maintenance and production of the imagined Asian American identity. In I’m the One that I Want, Cho portrays her own partiality towards the idea of a unifying solitary between Asians Americans by recounting the story of a car ride to Florida to meet the family of her Irish-American boyfriend.

[…] I was really worried, and I asked him, “Are there going to be any Asian people there?” And he was like, “no,” and I was like, “Okay, could you please drop me off at the dry cleaners, then? Because I don’t want to be the only one!” (Cho)

Even as a jest, Cho’s commentary implies an underlying sense of connection and emotional assurance between Asian Americans in the face of American mainstream society. Although this understanding of a shared common link through a tenuous racial identity is imaginary, its impact is real. In fear of standing out before the presence of her boyfriend’s Irish-American family members — representing the stereotypically white American racial canvas against which all other races and colors are juxtaposed — Cho attempts to gain comfort by drawing upon her Asian American roots. Yet identifying as “Asian American” is not without its drawbacks. Hidden behind the imaginary veil of an overarching pan-Asian unity, distinct cultures blur together to outside perspective, and taking refuge behind this shared identity enables self-segregation from others in an “us-versus-them” attitude, as demonstrated by Cho’s initial discomfort and self-consciousness before meeting her boyfriend’s Irish-American family. The term “Asian American,” therefore, represents the embodiment of the seemingly contradictory discontent against both social alienation from mainstream culture and the threat of cultural assimilation into mainstream American society, which enables both self-segregation and empowerment through imagined ties.
As Margaret Cho’s comedy demonstrates, those who identify themselves as Asian Americans are not merely passive victims—meekly accepting the labels from mainstream American society without question. Rather, Asian Americans have the capacity to reject external and internal influences that they perceive as a threat to the integrity of their identity and to reformulate the brand with their own ideas of what it means to be Asian American. In I’m the One that I Want, Margaret Cho admits that she was “not wholeheartedly embraced by the Korean community” and recounts one such instance of negative reaction to “All American Girl” (Cho).

[…] There had never been a star, an Asian American star of a sitcom before, and there was this, sort of, disgust everywhere. I opened up a newspaper at home, and in the editorial section, they had printed an editorial from a little Korean girl named Karen Kim, 12 years old, who had said, “When I see Margaret Cho on television, I feel deep shame.” (Cho)

The negative feedback from the Asian-American population “scared the network,” and—as mentioned earlier—forced the studio to depict what they perceived to be a more faithful representation of Asian Americans (Cho). This episode demonstrates that Asian Americans have the capacity to protest and to shape the terms of their own representations to maintain the integrity of their shared identity from potential threats both inside and out. Philip W. Chung, a former editor for the English edition of The Korea Times, remarked that much of the criticism surrounding the program originated from people who felt that “All American Girl” did not match their vision of what a Korean or Asian American show ought to embody (Chung). Yet as Chung later expands, even Korean Americans themselves proved unable to agree over what an authentic representation of their ethnicity would look like. For example, according to Chung, one point of contention in the controversy of “All American Girl” centered on the accents used by the Asian American actors of the sitcom. Some viewers felt the use of accents perpetuated stereotypes and demeaned Asian cultures while others felt accents added a realistic element to the immigrant characters of the show (Chung). Other Asian Americans criticized the sitcom in a variety of seemingly conflicting responses; to viewers, the show was too Asian, not Asian enough, or not authentically Asian, demonstrating that while Asian Americans themselves can—to a certain extent—reject perceived external and internal encroachments to the integrity of their Asian American identity, they also fail to agree upon what makes their shared identity authentic. The shared and internalized concept of the Asian American community seems tenuous, at best, yet it remains capable of eliciting strong spectrum of actions and emotions from those who embody the identity. While the concept of Asian-American identity will continue to remain undefined, its impact is real and cannot be denied.

**Asian American Identity: A Frankenstein’s Monster of Mixed Definitions?**

Tackling the questions of whether internal or external influences has more influence over the production of Asian American identity or whether one type of influence precedes the other is beyond the scope of this essay. But what is evident is that the nature of the Asian American identity proves ever changing, tenuous, and influenced by a wide range of factors, both external and internal.

In describing her crushing disappointment over the cancellation of “All American Girl,” Margaret Cho confesses in I’m the One that I Want,
When the show was over, I fell apart, and I didn’t know who I was at all. I was a Frankenstein’s monster made up of bits and pieces of my old comedy act mixed with focus groups’ opinions of what Asian Americans should be, mixed with the Asian consultant. I didn’t know who I was. All I knew was that I had failed and I had failed as somebody else. (Cho)

While Cho uses the concept of the “Frankenstein’s monster” as an allusion that evokes a negative connotation, her stand-up comedy routines portray Asian American identity as a concept made up of eclectic mix of ideas and sources derived from and fortified by various Asian cultures, external societal stereotypes, coalitions of political interests, etc., stitched together in a complex, unwieldy form. The process ultimately results in an idea neither Asian nor American—located in the liminal space between the two worlds and currently at the periphery of mainstream American culture.

Yet the intersection between external and internal constructions of Asian American identity need not always be hegemonic, coercive, or demeaning. For instance, in both Notorious C.H.O and I’m the One that I Want, Margaret Cho performs aesthetically unflattering but emotionally affectionate caricatures of her mother in which she scrunches her eyes and speaks in a heavy Korean accent with poor grammar, such as “Dees ees the best muddah’s day evah,” (“This is the best mother’s day ever”) or “I tell you story, I tell you story” (“I will tell you a story”) (Cho). Rather than avoiding or rejecting the negative stereotypical depiction of the Asian immigrant with small eyes and broken English—now considered inappropriate in proper society—Cho instead embraces it, demonstrating a state of positive liminal existence which Eleanor Ty—Professor of English and Film Studies in Wilfried Laurier University—calls “the vibrancy of being between worlds—the humor, self-mockery, and self-awareness of being exotic and other to both the West and the East.” (Ty). In her comedy, Margaret Cho, at her own discretion, chooses which positive and negative Asian American stereotypes to embrace or reject and complicates the understandings of authenticity by co-opting specific pieces of Asian American identity to build her own individual, Margaret Cho, identity.

**Conclusion**

Margaret Cho’s comedy is neither solely Asian nor American. It reveals the protean and ever-changing nature of the Asian American character, and instead of merely lamenting the conditions of her social exile as an Asian American from mainstream American society, Cho, through her stand-up comedy, embraces the vibrancy of being between—or being in neither—worlds. By revealing both the internal and external machinations behind the construction of the Asian American identity, Margaret Cho’s comedy complicates the suppositions of an authentic Asian American essence while acknowledging its effect on reality and engages her audience to do the same.

You, Me, and Our South Asian Rags-to-Riches Saga: Second-Person Narration and the Self-Help Structure in How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia

Grace Chao

Though How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia is completely fictional, Mohsin Hamid structures his 2013 novel to parody the self-help form, complete with twelve instructional, “step-by-step” chapters and the heavy use of second-person narration. We follow a protagonist denoted by “you” as he loses family, friends, and privacy in his ambitious journey to wealth and what he hopes is westernization. He must “move to the city” (from the slums of what appears to be Pakistan), “be prepared to use violence” (to ward off murderous competitors of his shady business), and, after he realizes that in his quest to become rich, he has become utterly lonely, “focus on the fundamentals” and “have an exit strategy.” From the moment we realize that Filthy Rich is a satire of the self-help form—its very opening declares the self-help genre an “oxymoron,” and “the idea of self in the land of self-help” a “slippery one”—we can also confirm that there are multiple levels of narration and reception operating throughout the book (1-2). The author is not the implied narrator, as it would be in an actual self-help book, and the “you” is not the reader. We—despite the fact that the readership for the Riverhead release would have been located in the United States, and the notion that the self-help form is a Western cultural phenomenon—likely have no need to get filthy rich in rising Asia. In fact, the “you,” as we will see, does not even seem to be given the freedom to “help” himself.

Who, then, is the “you,” and who is the narrator? Second-person narration may be inherent in the genre of self-help, but why does Hamid choose to parody self-help in the first place, and how does his particular use of “you” and second-person narration serve a relatively alienating story of trying to find success in an impoverished country? When asked why he thought “you” opened up a “wider narrative space,” Hamid simply agreed that second-person narration was liberating: “The purpose of the form is to enable” (Elmhirst 131). In light of that question (and unrevealing answer), I will argue that Hamid combines standard second-person narration and a satire of the self-help form (in which the narrator, or “writer” of the help, reveals nearly nothing about himself) to relinquish all control from the “self-helper”; he thereby illustrates the inevitable sordidness, and ultimate failure, that come with a “rags-to-riches” story in “rising Asia.” He entraps an impoverished Asian man within a perverted Western form, suggesting that there is no true escape: you cannot achieve the “American” dream, if you are not in America.

Before I further analyze the effects of Filthy Rich’s narrative structure, I would like to define some narratological terms crucial to second-person narration. In “Self-Help For Narratee and Narrative Audience: How ‘I’--And ‘You’--Read ‘How’,” James Phelan reminds us of the four types of audience in a fictional narrative (delineated by Peter Rabinowitz): the flesh-and-blood audience, which is the physical reader of HTGFRIRA; the authorial audience, or the hypothetical audience that the author wants to read his novel (in this case, educated readers living in first-world Western countries—not many others would have the time or resources to pick up a self-help parody); the narrative audience, or the imaginary audience the narrator is writing for (people who want to get filthy rich in rising Asia); and finally, the ideal narrative audience, who “accepts every statement of
the narrator as true and reliable” (Section 3, par. 4). The ideal narrative audience would be the “you” in the story that actually follows all the narrator’s steps to becoming “filthy rich.” The third and fourth audiences, however, are often conflated, and I will frequently redefine them as the “narratee”: the audience that is being addressed by the narrator (Phelan, section 3, par. 16). The protagonist in Filthy Rich, then, is a form of the narratee, the “you” that appears to genuinely experience all the novel’s events: moving to the city, selling illicit bottled water, and suffering multiple heart attacks, among other such events.

With a second-person novel’s different levels of audience now defined, it is interesting to consider the type of second-person narration employed in Filthy Rich, especially against the backdrop of a self-help satire. Brian Richardson classifies second-person narration into three kinds: standard, hypothetical, and autotelic. In standard narration, the protagonist (and usually the narratee as well) are identified as “you,” present tense is used, and the narrative form is traditional enough so that “you” could be replaced with first or third-person, and the story would mostly still make sense; it uses “you” for the possibility, and resulting ambiguities, of addressing the reader and the narratee at the same time (20). Contrastingly, hypothetical (or “recipe”) narration often plays out in the form of a “pseudo-guidebook”: we see “the consistent use of the imperative, the [somewhat related] frequent employment of the future tense, and the unambiguous distinction between the narrator and the narratee” (29). In other words, a passage or story written in hypothetical second-person narration is “written in the style of the user’s manual or self-help guide” (29).

What is striking, and unconventional, about Filthy Rich is that while it is written in the style of the self-help guide, the second-person narration within is actually standard narration, and not the expected hypothetical narration. The only imperatives are in the chapter titles: “Move to the City”; “Be Prepared to Use Violence”; “Have an Exit Strategy.” At the heart of Filthy Rich is the story of a “you” that experiences a sort of rags-to-riches saga, whom you could replace with an “I” or “he” had it not been for the self-help structure. Present tense also prevails, and at times (in the chapter beginnings, specifically), the “you” addressed could plausibly be the reader as well. So why does Hamid prize the present-tense standard narration over hypothetical narration, when Filthy Rich aims to imitate a self-help guide?

My assertion is that because Hamid is trying to satirize the self-help guide—not just simply imitate it—he employs an unconventional type of standard second-person narration within (whose specific purposes I will later discuss). Unlike much of the literature analyzed by Phelan or Richardson (short stories such as Lorrie Moore’s “How”), Hamid’s entire novel is a parody. The title imitates that of a self-help guide (if the reader can ignore the “filthy” that modifies the “rich,” putting the seriousness of the author into question). The form, however, is directly undermined and subverted on the opening page: “Some…might say that those who say [you read a self-help book so someone who isn’t yourself can help you] should be pinned to the ground and bled dry with the slow slice of a blade across their throats” (1). Shall we assume this “self-help” book is a helpful one and risk being pinned to the ground and bled dry? If we disregard the title—which describes a goal that the authorial audience is likely uninterested in—we can determine by page 2 that the narrator is not the author, and the narratee, the one seeking help, is not the reader: Hamid writes that before the book is of any help, “it has to find you, huddled,
shivering, on the packed earth under your mother’s cot one cold, dewy morning...[and] the virus afflicting you is called hepatitis E” (2). Thus we know that the guide within Filthy Rich is aimed at an imaginary narratee, and because Filthy Rich is a satire, this narratee will most likely not experience a positive transformation—what real self-help authors would hope their readers to undergo. At this point, we, the readers, can put our own worries aside. Yes, we seem to be receiving “fake” help, but what is of real concern is the narratee, the implied audience who would actually be receiving such dubious advice. We are about to see the “you” move from the countryside to the city, become moderately successful in running shady businesses but overwhelmingly lonely, and meet up only once every several years with his lifelong but faraway love interest, simply referred to as “Pretty Girl.”

The self-help style is subverted in several drastic ways. Louise Woodstock writes that narrative authority in the self-help genre is difficult to construct and maintain because while the author writes “within a genre that claims to abdicate authority directly to the reader [or ‘self’],” he must fill the narrative with his own stories, experiences, and transformation (321). If an intimate relationship between author and reader is not built, how can the reader be expected to trust and listen to the author? So “self-help book authors are in a quandary, surreptitiously building authority while purportedly relinquishing control” (322). The self-help author must construct his own character as “sympathetic, credible, and truthful, as holding good intentions, as responding to the [reader’s] needs, and most importantly as filled with a lay knowledge drawn from personal experience” (322). He will “[weave] his own story with that of the reader, pulling the relationship between them tighter”—somewhat akin to professional and patient (330). “I,” as a result, is used ram-pantly throughout; a normal self-help guide, then, employs both first-person narration and second-person narration to imitate an ongoing conversation.

The narrator, or self-help “author,” in Filthy Rich does none of that. He establishes no authority and no proof of expertise; he never even mentions if he has lived in or seen rising Asia. In fact, “I” is not used by the narrator until the end of the novel, when the narrator writes that “I suppose I should consider at this stage confessing to certain false pre-tenses…but I won’t,” further undermining his validity and reliability as a disseminator of sound advice (202). His attempts to grow close with the narratee are not seen; he never weaves in personal stories to inspire his reader, the narratee.

Yet the narrator does not have to, because in his use of standard second-person narration, he gives no freedom—relinquishes no control—to the narratee. Had he written in hypothetical narration and in imperatives (for example, “You will steal from your boss,” or “Steal from your boss.”), the “reader” or narratee would have actually been allowed to choose whether to steal from his boss. A true self-help guide is supposed to be more than a guide—the reader can ultimately choose what steps, if any, to follow. But the fact that the bulk of the novel is written in present tense means that everything is happening right now—as if the narratee had no choice but to adhere to the twelve steps of becoming filthy rich, and thereby becomes the story’s protagonist.

By the second half of Filthy Rich, the “you” has acquired enough “success” from his questionable business to accrue enemies and a gunman who is after him. His newly hired guard is ordered by his faction to kill the gunman first. We read that “you are ready to flee but your guard opens his door and steps out...he tells you to drive, and when you do
not seem to understand, he repeats himself, and you quickly obey.” Had the guide read “be quick to obey” or “you will be quick to obey,” the narratee could have decided in defiance that he did not wish to obey, or would not, in his mind, have been quick to obey (134). Because the second-person narration is in standard form and present tense, however, everything seems to transpire without the permission of the narratee, or self-helper. We know that the “you” was reluctant to kill the gunman because he “[does] not seem to understand” the bodyguard’s words after the shooting and is “unable to sleep” that night, but his autonomy has been constricted by the narrative devices of the narrator’s discourse. Instead of fleeing, the protagonist has to watch dumbly as his bodyguard shoots the already dying gunman in the face—one bullet “[dislodges] a curly-haired piece of cranium”—and then drive both of them away at the guard’s command (134). He is now also plagued with “vivid recollections of the gunman’s slaying” (134). That standard narration can be replaced with first person or third person—in which the protagonist (or even the actual reader) would then have no agency at all—only underscores the magnitude of the freedom that has not been relinquished to the self-helper in Filthy Rich. The “helper’s” direct relationship to the “self-helper” is better described as puppeteer or manipulator, and the puppetry is apparent from the novel’s beginning. When the “you” is still a child in the countryside, the protagonist’s father asks him if he “will be alright” (11). We learn that “you are in pain and frightened,” so “the answer is obviously no,” but the narrator has the “you” say yes (11). “[You then] take your destiny into your own hands,” when it is really the narrator’s hands (11). The narrator gradually kills off all the “you’s” family members, one by one, making it seem as if the “you” has no one else to foster a relationship with, and no choice but to listen to the narrator and become the story’s protagonist.

Why does Hamid choose a narrator that does not have the ability to help anyone else and who simultaneously does not relinquish control to the “you,” and how do these subversions of the self-help guide affect the flesh-and-blood readers—us—who obviously are not the direct audience of the narrator? What does Hamid intend to communicate to the reader about Filthy Rich, and how does his combination of self-help satire and second-person narration contribute to his message? To have any power over the reader in a satirical self-help guide, the author must first have power over the narratee-turned-protagonist (self-helper). Hamid uses standard second-person narration so he can conflate “you,” the reader, and “you,” the narratee or protagonist, but not necessarily in an effort to make us feel as if we are undergoing this same, ugly rags-to-riches process ourselves. I have thus posited that using “you” reminds us that we are not the narrative audience, and so we are spared all the gruesome side effects of the protagonist’s rags-to-riches story.

At this point, questions may arise: if we are not supposed to be able to directly identify with the “you,” how can a reader empathize with—feel the pain of—a character that is so different from him? How can an author make an impact on his reader, and keep the reader’s attention until the end of the book, without instilling some sort of empathy in him for the character? After all, Suzanne Keen reminds us in “Empathy and the Novel” that Vernon Lee “defined the purpose of art, in part, as ‘the awakening, intensifying, or maintaining of definitive emotional states’” (210).

I am not arguing that empathy is not felt between the struggling “you” in rising Asia and the expected audience of educated Western readers, though the creation of empathy in Filthy Rich may be admittedly more difficult: Keen writes that “no specific set of narrative techniques has yet been verified to over-ride the resistance to empathizing often displayed by members of an in-group regarding the emotional states of others marked out as
different by their age, race, gender, weight, disabilities, and so forth” (214). And among potential empathetic narrative techniques, Keen queries about the effects of second-person narration in the “Unanswered Questions” section of “Empathy and the Novel”: “Does the use of second person ‘you’ narration enhance the intimacy of the reading experience by drawing the reader and narrator close, or does it emphasize dissonance as it becomes clear that ‘you’ can’t include the reader?” (225).

The “you” in Filthy Rich may not include the reader, but that does not preclude him from eliciting empathy from his audience. While “emotional experiences of literature [often] depend upon the engagement of the literary text with the reader’s experiences,” David S. Miall and Don Kuiken “emphasize foregrounding effects at the level of literary style that shake up conventions, slow the pace, and invite more active reading that opens the way for empathy” (217). Filthy Rich certainly “shakes up conventions.” As I argued before, the narratee’s freedom as a “self-helper” has been seized through the controlling nature of both its present-tense “you” narration and ironic self-help form. Normally, readers might feel repulsed by a character that has chosen to take part in illicit business (selling pirated DVDs, expired food, and unregulated bottled water) and violence, just to make money. We do not, or do not want to, find engagement between the literary text and our own experiences because the actions taken by the literary character are ignoble ones; bringing down others to make oneself more financially successful is no new story.

In Filthy Rich, the circumstances are different because the “you” does not appear to get to make these “filthy” choices. Adam Smith argues in The Theory of Moral Sentiments that “the furious behavior of an angry man is more likely to exasperate us against himself than against his enemies”—in other words, we are not likely to feel sympathy (what Smith terms “fellow-feelings,” and what Keen summarizes as other-directed empathy, with “other” referring to the sufferer) for someone who has brought himself grief through his own unjustified doings. For others, however, their miseries may “inspire us with some degree of the like emotions” because “they suggest to us the general idea that some [bad] fortune has befallen [them]” (14). As the external reader who knows how self-help guides are supposed to be written and used, we realize the narratee is continuously being exploited, because he has no choice whether to listen to the narrator’s advice. Everything has been decided for him. He might be breaking the law with his dubious businesses, but at the same time he suffers too: a gunman targets him; his employees steal from him; his wife leaves him for another man. At the superficial level, some of these misfortunes may be caused by the protagonist’s own actions (he never did pay his younger wife much attention). Yet if we consider that the self-help narrator has, in a way, been manipulating him the entire time, then the “you” does not necessarily deserve the grief and loneliness that have come with his modest successes. Readers may better empathize with him because they know what it feels like to be undeservedly wronged.

Hamid renders the narratee not only powerless, but also more pathetic: the events of the “guide” are often written as if the author knows more about the narratee than the narratee knows about himself. “You” are unaware of your wife’s unfortunate condition when she birthed your child, that her love is slipping away, and that your brother-in-law is stealing from your funds. But because the self-help author has told us, we can feel pity, if not empathy, for him—everybody but him seems to know what terrible events will unfold. Blakey Vermeule writes in Why Do We Care about Literary Characters? that “narrative storytelling often depends on the reader’s awareness that there is a difference between
what the character experiences and what the reader herself knows.” This dramatic irony can create sympathy. She notes the swimmer-and-shark scenario as a common example: we read about a swimmer who is happily swimming but does not know she is about to be attacked by a shark, and we feel concern (or sympathy) for her (42). (We do not empathize at the moment because she is feeling happy, not concerned or fearful.) Likewise, we may feel embarrassed for the protagonist because he believes a jacket sporting the words “Man Meat” is fashionable, or that his gimmicky waiter’s outfit “connotes wealth and class” (103; 83). Readers have the capacity “to navigate different levels of intentionality rather quickly”; ultimately, we know from the beginning of Filthy Rich that the “you’s” intention (to become rich), and the narrator’s intention (that this self-help “guide” will fail to make the “you” truly, happily rich) will never coincide (42). The narrator, of course, knows too.

The helplessness of the narratee—ironic, as he is supposed to be reading a self-help book—communicates to readers the inevitable and dooming sordidness of a young person’s journey to achieve Western-like success in rising Asia. Becoming filthy rich in rising Asia seems to require being morally filthy along the way, but Hamid’s efforts in eliciting empathy from the reader help divert some of the wealth-seeker’s “filthiness” to the social issues that constrain him. This encapsulating message is reflected by the very form of the satirical self-help guide, a predominantly North American (or Western) genre that has exploded in recent years. A 2005 survey estimated that between one-third and one-half of Americans have purchased a self-help book in their lifetimes, and Scott McLean writes in “Public Pedagogy, Private Lives: Self-Help books and Adult Learning” that the genre has become one of the most “explicitly pedagogical domains of popular culture” (373-374). The imaginary storyline of an impoverished South Asian man reading a self-help guide to become “filthy rich” mirrors the pathetic and unsuccessful protagonist who wears a “Man Meat” jacket to impress the Pretty Girl—who, likewise, never achieves the Hollywood-esque status that she desires. Filthy Rich’s self-help guide fails to help the protagonist “you” become “filthy rich,” and this failure may represent the near impossibility of any happy rags-to-riches story in rising Asia. It is as if the narratee’s implied engagement with such a Western tool dooms him from the start. As flesh-and-blood readers, we recognize the conspiracy of this nameless self-help author, but can only feel more pity because we are incapable of reversing the trajectory of the narratee’s journey.

Yet Hamid is not necessarily criticizing the self-help form per se, and in the direct failure of the novel’s self-help portion may live the success of the intentions of the story as a whole. Marcel Cornis Pope writes that “unnatural voices” bring out the questionable nature of a cultural or ethnic narrative, and the narratee follows an unnatural voice indeed (3). Filthy Rich’s unnatural, manipulative narrator has illumined the “questionable nature” of a cultural narrative, making Western readers aware of the immense global inequalities that still heavily exist. The narrator may give no control to the “you,” but his advice at the very end, after he has admitted to speaking under “false pretenses” and nearing the protagonist’s death, rings true for all: “Focus on the fundamentals” (199). “Have an exit strategy,” or, spend your last days with the people you love (216). He has shown how lives may be destroyed, but also how lives may be, to some degree, recovered. Perhaps, then, we can extend some sympathy to the narrator as well.


Desires onto her Flesh

Huan He

Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman” warns of a forgotten aunt found in the crevices of family history. The “No Name Woman” had a child out of wedlock and drowned the child and herself in a well. No one in the family uttered her story until Kingston’s coming of age. The “No Name Woman” is a cautionary tale against temptation in order to raise a girl the right way. It is a tale meant to impose order and structure into Kingston’s life. Yet, there is something haunting about the story. In a tale full of negation, there remains a faint trace of agency – of possibility.

The following is a re-imagining of the “No Name Woman.”

“The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute.”

~ Maxine Hong Kingston,
*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*

The water will drown me soon. I am prepared. Two small drops of rain hit the gentle surface of the water’s calmness, causing the pool to form two small spirals. They stare back at me like eyes, vacuous and ready to take me in. Simultaneously, they penetrate into my eyes, washing away the memories of the pomegranate red smears on my walls. I let them. With each lapping of a wave, the memory of the raid begins to erode. I descend into coolness, a relief from the sticky sweat of childbirth that clings to my skin like a swarm of locust to a tree. I am ready to be engulfed, to surrender to the pool of water below me deep in the well. The pool stares back at me with eyes that taunt. I spit into the well to see how far it will drop. I don’t hear a splash. Then, she begins to cry.

*One. When I realized she was inside me, I experienced a moment of excitable terror. I was the carrier of my own demise, a creature that grows with the sole purpose of conjuring a wrath upon me. This creature would eventually grow into being with two legs, two arms, and eyes for watching. Her eyes would watch the world constantly and take in the pulses of life, internalize them, and become them. She would swallow up the world and ingest the delicacies of a world that would forever render her invisible. She and the world would become one. She would grow up and become a woman who always wanted more. Quiet but fierce, she would always take on her role in the world. Men would long for her, but she would remain reserved. At dark times, she would feel the gaze of a man looming in front of her, penetrating the quietness of her eyes. She would look down, just like her mother told her to, in order to dispel unwanted attention. She would rather sit in solitude and listen to the cricket songs than endure the projec-
tion of deep desires onto her flesh.

Then, she would meet a man who would lure her into a new world. This man had a soft face, long, flowing hair, and the rosiest cheeks. It was because of his gentleness that she felt secure and encased in a pleasant aura of warmth. He would caress her face and pull her towards his pulse in an effort to stroke her black hair. A pomegranate tree lingered above them, and he would reach up towards the jagged limbs of the fruit-bearer. He would have in his hands a red vibrancy that felt plump and swelled with life. The trees change their shades in a brilliant color spectacle, and it would be time for him to ask her to return home with him. He would stretch out his hand, and she would put her hand in his. They exchanged delicate words. His eyes would smile, and she would smile. The touches of their sensualities would emanate from their warm bodies as they pulsated as one. Soon, she would begin to grow as a surge of life filled the emptiness in her heart.

They would journey to the old land and construct a home for their coming daughter. In front of their house, a small, square garden placed neatly in the view of the right window signified orderliness in confinement. She would spend her days cooking steaming plates and pulling the weeds from the garden patch. The ferocity in each pull would shake the ground as she labored over maintaining the hygiene of the garden. Blooms and stems would erect themselves, and she would nurture them as one would nurture a newborn. She would feel the life of her children as they blossomed into adulthood. Each bloom would be an irreplaceable splash of radiance within the square. She would occasionally miss her homeland, a land that clung to the imprints of her memory. She would miss the smell of the sea breeze and the glow of the fireflies. He would try to relieve her of heavy thoughts in order to nurture her and the baby within. His kind words would drizzle over her like soft rain to a fever.

But his love would not outlast the hands of mortality.

She would continue to believe that his love was too much for his heart. That would be the answer that explained it. After days of grieving, she would finally pick herself up and return to her garden. Each flower would look more beautiful with time as if they were in a joust against the scythe. She would persist to pull out the weeds that did not belong and that enmeshed itself into the comfort of the patch. Between the drops of tears, she would persist.

Slowly, she would rise from her garden and feel heaviness in her head. At first, it would feel like wooziness from a bodily rush. Then, it would proceed to feel spectral as memories of the left-behind begin to pervade her. She would remember her old land but the images would flicker then fade in her mind. She would begin to walk in an attempt to regain the blood flow in her body. But the faintness would pursue. With each step that she would take, she would feel lighter. She would move her feet in larger strides but a tingling beneath her skin would begin to spread throughout her body. She would succumb as the phantom swallowed her from within.

Two. The cries echo, causing the pool of water to ripple. One would think that the cries would sound lower and fuller due to the intensity of its volume. Rather, each cry is sent piercing through the air, penetrating the calmness of the well. I turn to look at the crea-
ture lying in the grass. Little pieces of hay still stick to the slime on her body. I try to clean her up, soothe her, before I start to complete my last deed. But it is as if she keeps on oozing the slime in which she would wallow. I lift her into my hands, attempting to hold her one last time. When I look closely into her squinting eyes, I can almost see a life, bursting to get out.

As I watch the cries escape her mouth, I begin to feel calmness once again. The feeling encroaches the sounds escaping the creature, generating a lingering silence. I look past the well and feel.

A chilling embrace.
Beat after beat skips.
Stand on limbs that stick. Down.
Moistness stick to the palms as it grows steady.
Keep stillness.

You are weak.

Take in wisps of coldness.

You seek the bliss of the blackness.
A lonely blackness that drenches the soul in perpetual melancholy.

Steady as the ground.
Solid.
Embrace the impending collapse.
Hold within. Tightly.

Look into me and see the imprints.
The past is crawling through. Seeking a vessel.

Deep desires onto her flesh.
Desires onto her Flesh.

Hold still. Release.
Black space opened.

I notice the woman has gone. She fades away, but I still see her shape and his hand. The cold air holds an imprint of her translucent skin. Her waves of black hair become the wind. Her eyes are quiet but fierce.

Three. The water always soaks me in comfort. In my teenage years, I waded in the sea to gather seashells. Each shell glistened in the water, inviting me to explore the enchantment of each unique shell. Sometimes, the waves would roll in and deposit the treasures of a plethora of vibrant shells. Other times, the water would recede, taking back the
shells and concealing them in the depths of the black water.

Now, I am rinsing my feet in the water, turning over the sand with the hopes of uncovering a new seashell. I hear splashes in the distance. I look toward the horizon and see a small fishing boat approaching the shore. A single man stands near the front of the ship, beckoning me to step into the water. I cling to the air with my gaze unbroken.

Slowly, the man in the boat drifts closer to where I stand. He is shirtless, and his skin shines from the touch of the sun. His blonde hair radiates a yellow glow, but his white skin emanates a ghostly faintness. He looks at me; his eyes vacuous as the depths of the sea. I try to move or run away, but a sudden chill overtakes me. He moves his feet out of the boat and steps toward my sand.

Coldness. A brisk penetration.
Frantic pants escape in puffs.
Hand on skin. Soft.
Seduce.
Pray to the skies and the Virgin.
Beat after beat skips.
Water covers the body.
Electric charge surges through.
Skin clings to the air.

Desires onto flesh.
Desires into
My flesh.

Months later, my belly begins to swell.

Four. I am returning home from the market with eggs, rice, and some pomegranates in my basket. The trail to the house through the forest makes for a pleasant afternoon stroll. I walk through the trail, completely absorbed by the looming scent of rain. I look at the mud trail below and notice a set of footprints leading toward my home. My eyes dart forward.

The first sight that meets my eyes is the red. On the front door, a smear of assaulting vibrancy, the color of dried blood, marks the place as forbidden. Surrounding the house are the scattered carcasses of mutilated chickens, pigs, and roosters. A shy breeze picks up a pocket of dust, scattering it among the silence that pinches my every nerve. A burning sensation surges through my bones, leaving me stuck to the ground. The wrath has arrived, invisible in its presence but assaulting in its residue. Why must the woman always be the pig? Why must the woman be the one who is slaughtered, battered, fried, and dissolved into oblivion until her existence only reverberates through the silences? I know that I have to run. My home is now forbidden, and I have nowhere to go.

The first wave rolls through me.
I run back through the forest and feel the heaviness of tears in my eyes. My brothers who have always provided me with tender warmth have revoked their ties and cast me out, naked and exposed. I remember the secrets behind their eyes, penetrating and full of shame. I do not look back but run to the only place in nature that returns me to a blissful state.

The laps of the water are menacing as the clouds grow a malevolent shade. My familiar serenity is disturbed. The ice of the impending haunt looms nearby, but I must ignore it now. My knees grow weak as I have been running for too long with my swelling. I keep panting, hoping the rhythms of my body do not tick-tock away my mortality.

The second wave crashes, leaving me fractured.

The tension within me becomes impossible to bear. I feel the air around me condensing, collapsing into being and placing its weight upon my tired back. I could feel the ghosts of my ancestors, burning their stares into the bareness of my neck and persisting with a relentless flame. I hold on to my tears. I refuse to experience my implosion. I taste the firmness of my lips and bite down to hold onto my flesh.

I begin to lose my body to the earth. The waves take their toll, and in the blackness, the memories start bleeding through. I see the elders in my family playing mahjong on the stone table. Their faces are still, pensive and focused on perfecting the next move. The neighborhood kids dance around the elderly, frolicking and wallowing in the boiling summer heat. Their faces are all red from the wetness of sweet watermelon. Laughter rings through the haze, but slowly, the decibels of the joyful shrieks cause my images to burst. I embrace the blackness.

The wave breaks.

Five. The crying pierces through the thickness of the still air. The woman who was the wind has drifted into the past. She has become the fragments of memories never created, resisting the slash of the scythe. Her gaze still haunts me as I proceed toward the little baby girl lying in the grass covered by soft pieces of hay. I look at her and see her watchful eyes glisten with brilliance. I place my tender hand directly under her head and hold her close.

Motherhood is a strange feeling. It is tenderness speckled with feelings of anxiety, rage, and bliss, just to conjure up a few. Her head feels light in the coldness of my hands. I start to walk, carrying her as she starts to soften her cries. As I approach the well that sits with hungry patience, I view a glimpse of those eyes still watching me. They are as fierce as the newfound piercing silence. I persist toward the stones guarding the pool of water, hoping that amidst the stars, my ancestors would eventually find comfort and peace. The water contains a lurking silence. I spit again into the well to disturb the blackness below. No splash can be heard. The memories of the past and unformed future leech onto my skin as I hold the girl closer to my chest. She hears all of my secrets that I have contained within my skipping beats. The rhythmic pulse seems to soothe her. I feel at ease.

A gentle wind caresses the back of my neck. It leaves me undisturbed as my eyes are
focused on the future below me. Ready and hungry, the well waits for the moment of devotion. It is a moment saturated with the red blood of sacrifice and the accompanying haunting of the future ghost. I embrace the girl tightly and succumb to the fall.

The blackness begins to swallow.
Niam and Txiv told kuv that if peb come to Meica land peb will go to school and peb will be happy. Nyiab and Txiv did not tell me that in America land, the people white laugh at peb, point their fingers at peb, and stare at peb. Nyiab and Txiv told me that in America, the white people may laugh at us, point their fingers at us, and stare at us, but we cannot do the same. Mom and Dad told me many things, but soon I stopped listening. Soon, I found myself lined up against the school walls with my friends, pointing at the dirt-stained faces sprinkled with small eyes that could not even stare back into mine.
Mournings

Mark Flores

The Eternal Sunset mourns the Last Cherry Blossom falling from the Mulberry Tree that my Ancestors have spend Generations cultivating in the Homeland.

I.
Take the 3-D glasses and slide them on before you watch the show.

You’ll need to make sure the animation just pops into real life, and you know It looks like they’re right in front of you, the ninjas like Tom Cruise as they cut off the topknots and the kung fu masters beat everyone with their Tae Kwon Do.

Or watch the wallflower girls shed a tear as they protect their foreign lovers with their paper fans while their mothers’ drink tea and noodles straight from the wok from their vengeful brothers “protecting their family’s honor.”

And when the movie ends, please take off the glasses and continue on.

III.
Movie directors need to get their own lives.

III.
How DARE the Asians steal all the spots at <insert university>. All they do is study and work hard all day and make sacrifices but my family has been taking up all the spots at <insert university> and the Asians are threatening the diversity of <insert university> and our <insert majority race> majority (because we certainly wouldn’t want to become a minority, would we?—how terrible would that be!)! They don’t DESERVE the opportunities <insert child’s name> has taken for granted.

IV.
Now that my child has finally gotten in to <less prestigious university> all of his/her professors don’t speak English. It’s not like they were hired because our own education system is insufficient to support our own graduates (or drop outs) and I wish these foreigners never even came here (because there are clearly enough extra teachers available). This is why I told my child not to major in <insert STEM field> because that’s where all the Asians are. Humanities professors are normal (and will be kept that way). After all, we have to support diversity (i.e. Hiring different people of the same ethnicity).

V.
The glasses are still on.

IV.
There is no ending.
Interrupted Shimchong, Interrupting

Hye Jeong Yoon

She stood on the edge, grand precipice, shivering. Alone. Behind her stood others, faces downcast. Brawny, grown men and their cheeks that glistened with tears. Each drop an apology, delusional praise. But for what, they could not say. Though they wept, the harsh wind whipped the tears off their faces, and the heavy rain flooded their eyes till they could no longer see clearly the girl as she inched closer and closer to the stormy waters beneath her.

Her pale, alabaster skin was near iridescent underneath the fiery red, cobalt blue, canary yellows of her bridal hanbok. She did not weep. Though she heard the moans and cries of the men behind her, pentecostal chants, she was silent. Her face reflected a deep calm, Buddha calm, but a bulky man grabbed her abruptly. He bound her hands and her feet and pushed; she nearly fell off the side.

They thought she had gone overboard, but she was there, facing them. For a brief moment, they caught her lips mouthing words. Who were they for? What was she saying? They strained their eyes against the wind and water, but in a mere blink, she had disappeared. And the waters calmed. As if nothing had ever happened. They scanned the seas half-thinking she would be there on the waves, standing, gliding, walking, shining. But all they saw was brilliant blue sky. Nothing remained of her.

☯

Shim gingerly touched her stomach, her hands pushing down over her vintage flannel shirt. Goddamn it, Oppa, do you think people can tell? I can’t go to work like this. Shit shit shit.

Yong-Jeh rolled his eyes. He folded the ends of his khaki slim fit pants (right at the ankle) and slipped on his weathered chukka boots. You’re pregnant, what did you think you were gonna look like? Just calm down. Besides, don’t you have a crap ton of loose, flowy, bohemian tops? He tucked in his own crisp checkered shirt over his ‘Optimus Prime is Sexy’ t-shirt and began spreading honey over his gluten-free bread. Also, Shim, aren’t you currently curating an exhibit showcasing Terry Richardson’s photography at the museum? Terry Richardson. You’re hardly going to be the most scandalous image there.

Shim sighed and tousled her wavy, bob-cut, ombre hair. I know that, but still, I’m just not ready to tell people. Plus, they’ll ask questions. ‘Who’s the guy?’ Or ‘did you decide to go with some stranger’s sperm?’ I can’t deal with another interrogation after my talk with Appa.

Yong-Jeh packed his REI nalgene bottle into his leather messenger bag briskly. You mean, your verbal lashing by Appa. But seriously, have you told this Omar guy yet that you’re pregnant with his child? Who is this dude anyways, you haven’t told me anything
about him. You just showed up last night, crying, looking a mess. Baby sister, I worry.

She moved off the Ikea couch onto the carpeted floor. Well, there’s not much to tell. I met him at Equinox, that fancy gym you look down on for being so bougie, doing yoga. We just started talking, and we went to that gastropub Father’s Office in Culver City, the one on Helms, not Montana, and bonded over our shared confusion of fruity craft beers. And the rest is well, ya know, easy. We’re two grown, attractive, hipster-yuppies with established careers, single, blah blah. But, ok fine, if you need a breakdown, he’s black, though he’s actually half-French, and he works in finance law. I’m pretty sure Charlie Yang, who went to USC Law School knows him somehow. And no, I don’t plan on telling him soon. I don’t even have his number. And that’s my choice, just like it was mine to keep this baby, despite Appa. God. Appa. Shim buried her face in her hands.

Yong lightly punched her shoulder. Hey, don’t worry about it. You have a place to stay here as long as you need. It’ll be like old times, like when you took your leave from Yale and crashed here. Hey, at least you don’t have to deal with smelly art school dudes this time, right?

Shim returned the shoulder punch. Thanks Oppa. Honestly, I don’t even...I don’t even fucking know what I’m going to do…..But go to work. Go make some kick-ass, kid-friendly Pixar movies, Yong-blood.

Jumping up, Yong dashed to the door. Chyeah dude. You know how I do. But honestly, Shim, text me if you need anything later. And don’t forget about your meeting today with Raden. She’s super stoked. I’ll be praying for you and Appa both at Friday worship tonight too. Another place you’re always welcome to join if you feel so inclined.

God. Appa. Shit.

Maybe, she thought. She shouldn’t have said anything.

They’d played that game for years. So many conversations they could have had, but never did.

When she was a kid it was, Appa, where’s Omma? Why did she leave us? Why did she abandon us? When is she coming back? Where is she? Why did she leave you? Did you make her leave? Does Jesus love her even though she doesn’t love us?

As she grew older, the unspoken questions and conversations became more complex, layered, easier, but harder to conceal and avoid. And as her ability to speak Korean waned, the opportunity for such discussion declined as well.

Appa, I wanna study art history. I don’t want to work at the liquor store anymore. I want to fly away from Los Angeles, real fucking far. Appa, I’m not sure what I am, but I think I like girls too. Will I burn in hell? Appa, I’m sorry Omma left, I never meant to leave forever too. Did she ever call us? Can I go find her in Korea, can I go yell at her for you, for us? Appa, I appreciate you and all you have done, I understand now. You did the best you
could. The liquor store didn’t work out, but you’re not a failure. I will be your prize, your masterpiece, the crowning glory that supports you in your last days. Appa, how can you be so strong, but so fucking fragile at the same time? Appa, I’m queer, and I’m proud. But I can’t say it. Not to you. Because it would destroy you. I love you and I always will. Will you love me forever too?

Whenever she mused on their relationship, she couldn’t help but feel that her life was like so many of those in the novels and poems and essays by Asian American authors she studied in school. Fuckin’ Amy Tan and Chang-rae Lee and shit. All those classes at Yale on Asian American identity, searching hungrily for the words and the conversations and the discussions so that she could break the silence, the muzzle she had put on, in herself.

And she thought these things would help, but they didn’t.

Shimchong-ah, you cannot do this! Please tell me you did not do this! With who?! A black man?! Are you out of your mind?! You must get an abortion. You need to get an abortion. You don’t know, but I do. Destroying property, looting, shooting, you don’t remember such times in LA, no, this baby is better off not being born. It will never belong. And you will never belong again either. Shimchong-ah, you cannot do this. What about marriage, uh? Kyul-hon eun, uh? Nuh mee-chyussuh?! You are Korean! Korean. Hang-gook sa-ram!

She should have yelled back. But she left. And so said nothing and walked out the door of the house she grew up in, that she paid the mortgage off for. She had to leave. He never said it, but she knew. If she stayed and had a half-Korean child, his chances to move up in the church hierarchy would be ruined. He was a jeeb-sah, and with his service, he would be moving up. It was his whole world now, especially without the store, without a wife.

She had to leave. Because she wanted the child. Or rather, she couldn’t even think of not having the child. Giving the baby up was an option, but she wouldn’t be like her mother, her ‘Omma’. This baby, this child would have a mother, even one as unprepared and emotionally distraught as herself.

In all of this, Shim had forgotten. Dating. Date. Tonight. Fuck. Somehow she doubted that she, a pregnant, single, late-twenties life crisis, emotional wreck should be dating or entertaining the thought of a relationship at all. But Raden Chaichua, shit Raden. She was someone who could change her mind.

They’d met at New Life Community Church, of all places.

Frankly, Shim had decided long ago that the Korean church was not her community, her safe space. Years of witnessing women suffer through indignities, only to then sympathize with the suffering of Jesus, in some strange configuration of masochistic rapture. No fuckin’ thanks.

But she agreed anyway, when her brother invited her to his church filled with ‘1.5/2nd-genners’ like themselves. Instead of stiff suits and corsages, she found an openness re-
openness reflected in style and attitude (save for the tightness of some skinny jeans). This acceptance allowed Shim to be open as well, with her doubts, her fears, her sexuality. Her words had worth here. Even if they were not adamantly embracers of queerness, they sure as hell never rejected her for it either.

And in that space, she caught sight of her. Playing the drums. Neon orange beanie on a mess of short, choppy black hair. Black gauges in her ears, silver lip ring, worn green and white baseball tee over torn, tight grey jeans. Shim was surprised upon meeting her of two things: her age and her height.

She was tall. Taller than most of the men she had known in her life. Everything about her was long, lithe, lean. Tan and Thai. God, she ran the risk of sounding like a predator. How old was this girl, 19, 20? She was practically a decade older than her. But that was the other surprise. Raden was 28. Only one year her minor. And more vocal about everything, including her affections, than she could ever think to be.

Hence, the dating, date.

I’ll meet you at the church in San Fernando Valley. We can go chill in North Hollywood. Let’s go thrift shopping at Buffalo Exchange. Afterwards, when we get hungry, we can go eat some soondooboo in K-town. How does that sound, Shim? Pretty fuckin’ awesome, right? Can you get here ok with the traffic? I know you’d have to drive here after work in Santa Monica, but I can wait at the church. I’ve been perpetually studying for law school these past few weeks as it is, ya know?


And that was that.

She was in some deep shit. Real deep shit.

When she was with Raden, everything else disappeared. It was like being in Saving Face with Riot Grrrl rock rakin’ as the soundtrack in the background. Like being a teenager in some angsty 90’s movie come true. Gregg Araki directing a New Queer Cinema Asian American romcom. ‘Dazed queer Confused Asian American Doom Generation’ minus psychopathic menage a trois.

They gallivanted all over Los Angeles. Suntanning on Venice Beach, walking the pier. At Raden’s behest, Shim even got her belly-button pierced there. She quit her membership at Equinox and started rock climbing with Raden and her brother. Who knew the Valley was so close to Stoney Point, premier bouldering destination?

Trail-running the Santa Monica Mountains.

Sharing a first kiss at the waterfall in Malibu Canyon.

Some surreal, real romantic shit.
But they also talked. And Shim loved these conversations with Raden more than anything.

What were you like as a kid? What are your greatest fears? Why do you love sweet potatoes so much? Why law? What’s so great about photography anyway? Do you hate 500 Days of Summer as much as I do? Oh my god, David Finch, and yes I fucking love Darren Aronofsky too! How is the corporate culture of arts administration treating you? All you asked for and more? When did you know you wanted to be an art historian? When did you pick up the drums? Have you always been this fearless, this bold, this exuberantly loud?

And Shim couldn’t help it:

I’m pregnant. I’m keeping the baby.

Raden couldn’t help it either:

What’s his name? Are you friends? Are you okay? Is there anything you need? I still love you. Shit I said it. I love you, Shim, it doesn’t matter to me.

Bites tongue, bites lips, wants to say the words, but afraid, swallows the words I love you too.

And Shim learned so much about Raden. The fact that Raden is one of five siblings, two of whom know she’s a lesbian. She wants to go to law school for social activism, working in the non-profit sector for queer immigrant rights. She has never lived anywhere outside of LA, except for a brief summer, filled with sexual exploration in San Francisco. Her Thai family is very traditional, very Buddhist, and her parents have worked their entire lives as domestic workers in Beverly Hills. She recently came back from volunteering in Thailand with sex workers, and she has a slight disdain for older, straight white men. She began attending New Life a year before, after becoming friends with Yong at a concert. She doesn’t speak to her parents. She does not plan to. Ever.

And here in those moments, they inevitably disagreed as well.

For Shim could not and would not abandon her father. No, she could not just walk away and leave her father like Raden. And no, she did not appreciate Raden’s manner of reference to her parents. Why didn’t she see they had done their best? They deserved her respect at the very least, didn’t they, and a call once in a while? Wouldn’t it have been better if she maintained her relationship with her parents, why did she feel the need to tell them? She knew Raden wasn’t bitter, but couldn’t she respect who she was and still respect her parents as well?

And Raden would respond: Why are you so afraid to be yourself? Do you not see that living with so many lies, so many kept conversations is only muting you, gagging you? Why can’t you move in with me in my apartment in the Valley? Why can’t you say the words Shim? I get that you have doubts and fears, but. Do you even love me? Think about it. You already know where I stand and where I am.
Where are you?

Where are you? asked her father. Are you coming soon? You know I don’t like to wait. How are you doing, Shimchong? I haven’t seen you or heard from you in a while. I heard from your brother that you are attending church again. This is good. Did you get the promotion at work? Are you eating? You don’t eat enough meat. Koreans needs meat, peuh-ro-teen.

Shim didn’t respond for a long time on the phone.

She had long resolved to say these words, but not like this. And so she made plans to meet. She hadn’t seen him in half a year at least. Total filial detox.

But she knew she had to do this. He had to know. She had to say, to speak.

She hung up after promising to meet him over pho after the morning service.

She would tell him everything, in her own words tomorrow.

In her own Goddamn words.

She would say.

I love you.

Hey Appa, I love you. I never said so before, and you never said it to me, but I love you. And I will never leave you. Ever. You are a part of me, and I can never and will never cut you out.

Hey Appa, I’m keeping this baby. This baby is your grandchild. And they are Korean, will be Korean, because I am Korean, die a Korean, han-gook saram, too.

Hey Appa, I’m queer. And I know you don’t really know what this is or what it means and you might not ever want to care, but I’m telling you this now. I’ve known since I was young. But I was so afraid of you, of Omma’s fucking ghost, of the fires of hell, of your sadness, drowning in your tears, that I never told you, that I bound myself. But I’ll never lie to you again. I’ll never hold back my words, because I love you Appa. And I’m in love. With a girl. Her name’s Raden. We met at church. I love her.

I love her.

Yes, Raden, I love you. I can’t move in with you; I’m moving back into my own house, but know this because I know it: I love you.

And if I could shout it out over the howling of the wind, the sting of the rain, storms rag-
ing on a violent sea, you would still hear it. You would hear my voice. See my face. Yes, I would not hide myself as a flower waiting to open, waiting to be opened, waiting to be pushed off the side.

Quiet sacrifice, slow martyrdom, no. Not for me.

I would yell. My prayers would reach the heavens, and my declarations would be what heal you, heal me, calm the seas, release us from our collective blindness.

Be the savior of my own fucking choosing.

Yes, I love you.

I love you.
Across the Pacific and Back Again

David Bradshaw

Ever since I was introduced to American studies in middle school I have struggled to grasp an essentialist understanding of the basis for the Asian-American ethnic ethos. It is not that I have never had the motivation to understand the collective or individual narratives of my heritage; I think that anyone who is born into our starkly heterogeneous society eventually grows an impressed motivation to do so.

I was born to a Caucasian, Los Angeles native father and a Filipino, rural town bred mother. My father is of mixed German and Western European descent and grew up speaking some German with his grandmother and mother; he possesses the Anglican surname “Bradshaw” due to the timing of his mother’s divorce from her previous marriage. My mother is of Chinese and Filipino descent, but as far as she has learned, the customs of her fourteen-member nuclear family are mostly of Filipino origin. I grew up with my father narrating the atrocities that the Third Reich brought into the world and how since then the Federal Republic of Germany has become an agent for good in global affairs. My mother narrated the subjugation done onto the Philippines by the Spanish Empire and its struggle for sovereignty under the American Insular Government. As a child, I read every book I could get my hands on about these topics and would proudly recount all I learned to my parents. This lasted only for perhaps a period of two years: My parents were in constant conflict, and being their child, I did not wish to show favoritism for either, so I stopped studying my heritage altogether to minimize whatever I could that was possibly adding to their strained relationship.

Later into early middle school, I started to question why events from the very distant past, and completely inexperienced by my parents, could have such an impression on them. In my naivety I concluded something along the lines of “my parents are too emotional,” that my parents were too sensitive to the stories of injustice done onto their older relatives and that these passed down memories gave them an identity that was resilient by its definitions of ancestral struggle, an identity that was—and again, I naively believed—not rightly theirs since the struggles were not directly experienced by them. It was only until later in middle school and early high school that I learned that these impressions held by my mother and father were sustained by persisting systems of oppression: bias in the judicial system, unequal educational opportunities across demographics, lack of opportunity due to historical labor laws and business practices, and the psychological scarring that has been proven to persist through many generations.

Though I came to recognize academic models of oppression, I still possessed some unsubstantiated sense of apprehension towards the general area of studies in structural oppression. The pivoting point to this hesitancy came during a conversation I had during a conversation I had with a close high school friend, Allen, an English major at an “elite” liberal arts college. We were queuing at a theater entrance to see The Hunger Games: Catching Fire when we began to discuss how our views on our ethnic identities had changed since attending college.

“Well, first, people label me some form of ‘atypical’ since I’m a male Asian student who
wants to pursue something in the humanities,” Allen started. “Second, sometimes we’d talk about aspiring careers or some other topic that leads to them declaring what high-earning jobs their parents have and then they follow up to ask what my parents do. And I’m just like, ‘My mom works in a nail salon and my father doesn’t have a job right now but he used to be an auto mechanic.’ Then there comes the very unnatural, yet seemingly expected response of ‘Oh, that’s so cool.’ ”

“Or you get that ‘your parents must be so proud’,” I replied, reflecting on my own experiences of telling students about my working class family. “Then the conversation just stops there—most often at least.”

“Yes, I realized that there is the belief in college, unlike in high school, that Asian Americans make as much if not more than white Americans. I try to avoid the topic, because I feel it isn’t the right context, but sometimes I’m just like, ‘Well, Cambodians were admitted to the United States under a different set of immigration laws, and it so happened that we are actually among the lowest earning demographics.’ Have you undergone any sort of politicization at Stanford?”

“Nope. I joined the low-income first-generation organization to do some awareness work, but that’s about it.”

“Have you ever thought your mixed heritage necessitates that you have to be political when certain problems arise?” Allen asked.

“No, not really. In high school, I fit in with the other students because they thought my mother was Mexican just from my looks. The teachers were biased towards me, because they thought I was like their other Asian-American students. And in college, some people just assume I’m white. I’ve never really had a reason to become politicized,” I said. “I remember my mother would ask me if I felt I was more Filipino or more white, and I’d just say I was American. I know that’s a myopic view—I was young—but even as far as exchanging any given cultural product or belief, I never was at conflict with somebody whether they were in favor of the majority or minority.”

“But you see, that is my point. In that Eurasians essentially default to the mainstream American culture by way of external influences, you actually have the chance to claim that ethnic ethos without the justification that it was bred in you.”

“I still do not see exactly how inherent lineage can be a justification for partaking in a movement, the aim of which is to remediate historical and prevailing injustices done to people of that culture, that demographic,” I replied in blocks of speech separated by split seconds of contemplation now that the conversation was in full swing. “If my un-identifiability as part Asian has lent me the ability to detour the residuals of these unjust systems, then I still do not see what justification I have to partake in that movement. That would basically render me an ally, not an advocate.”

“Yes, I know, but still... There is more to this—the language for it is just escaping me right now,” Allen said with his voice trailing off as he thought.

“Take for example, a child of any given, historically oppressed heritage born into an upper middle class family—their upper middle class status lends them the socioeconomic background to avoid or at least optimally avoid these residual effects. What reason do they have to validate their participation in such a movement if they wish to do so?”

“Yes, yes, I know, but for that case, the child’s socioeconomic success was only possible because of the cumulative work of their ancestors to incrementally reach that status,” Allen argued. “Their work was needlessly hampered by systems of oppression, systems which are still present to this
day, and in that way the ethnic ethos—in that way it is necessary for these upper middle class children to continue carrying the ethnic ethos alongside their socioeconomic status to dismantle those systems.”

“Okay, I agree completely on that point. But to go back to the instance of Macklemore’s participation in the LGBT civil rights movement, why cannot a person not of that specific heritage partake in that movement even if they have the socioeconomic status to help dismantle those systems? I still do not see why race and identity are requisites to fulfilling that position.” It did not make sense to me why an outsider could not take a leading role in a social movement.

“You were taking a white, heterosexual, wealthy male to advance a movement for a historically oppressed demographic he was not a part of—”

“But he got the message across—”

“No—one, the message was commercialized; two, the rightful person to take that position would be a person originating in the LGBT community—”

“What do you mean rightful? How is it rightful or un-rightful if the person to take that position is or is not inherently part of that community? Macklemore was an ally with the resources to advance that movement.”

“I really do not believe that; the origin of such change is critical, we both know that—”

“Wait. . . so is it that we must ensure the narrative—the history that future people read about this movement—is it that they must see that an oppressed person led their demographic to dismantle those systems—that it was not someone who was historically privileged, using those privileges that were inverse to the structural disadvantages put onto people unlike him, to ensure that those privileges are not in a way perpetuating themselves, even if they are used to undo the oppressions that were inverse to themselves…?”

“Yeah, I think so. Yes, I really believe that, but…”

“I know it is strange. There is something missing, something unclear to the argument.”

“But it makes sense to you now, right?”

“Yes, but, there’s something—there’s some component to that need for the driving force to originate from the oppressed population that just seems so…”

“Yeah, I get what you mean. I don’t think I have the language right now to articulate the sort of logical bridge from that point. But, yeah, I think that is among the main points for it to happen that way.”

I was not stunned at that conclusion. That moment actually came very peacefully and I just repeated the idea to myself: We must not allow the historical privilege inverse to pervading oppression be the means of undoing that oppression. I then asked with less confidence, “So, do you think that this must happen to, like, prove some innate mechanism of democracy?”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘prove’? I don’t see the need to prove something that far re-
moved from. . . We’re talking about people—”

“Okay, yes, I get your point. I actually didn’t know where I was going when I said that,” I replied meekly.

I suppose at that point I reconciled my childhood confliction of espousing either Asian or Caucasian identity. For a moment I remembered how it felt to be a child learning the narratives of his parents. That kindling feeling was distanced from my contemporary intuition on my Eurasian American identity by a need for an analytical understanding of structural oppression. It required a realization of the nebulous terrain that academics must navigate to turn those years of analytical approach into a bridge to bring back those kindling feelings. Perhaps in the near future an academic will extrapolate why “we must not allow the historical privilege inverse to pervading oppression be the means of undoing that oppression,” if such an extrapolation has not yet been completed. In any case, there is some attribute genuinely novel about being a Eurasian American such that I do not need a rigorously critical explanation for it to suffice. It is something that I feel in my bones, just as my mother and father felt their ethnic heritages in their own.
Perpetuated Foreigner

Mark Flores

My family has been in United States for as long as I can remember. Longer than anyone else can remember, actually. My family’s history in America has spanned years, decades, and centuries, has covered history books, and has crossed timelines like they were the oceans my grandfather conquered as he moved onto American soil in the 1800s, when the Civil War was our generation’s World War II, when women had just claimed their right to vote, when our nation was still incomplete, and when our flag was still missing stars. He had left everything he had known and arrived with nothing, not even his family, in the hopes that someone like me could call America my home. He was successful.

America has been my only home, and I have never even set foot in Asia. I have received a watered-down cultural upbringing, Chinese culture diluted with America so thin, it tastes like stars and stripes; 5th generation is a heap of steak and potatoes with a touch of five spice. In this way, my grandfather’s sacrifice continues to accumulate, as he has traded this culture for another, and year after year, generation after generation, his children walk further away from the paths he has walked into territory now foreign to him.

Here I am, an American child, more ignorant than a newborn.

I found myself here on campus, eating in the open air with 3 friends, when I was approached. Two girls walked up to us and asked if we could take a survey. We said yes, because they said they had come from China to visit Stanford. They asked which of us held part time jobs, and 5 pairs of eyes looked at me.

I gulped and exhaled, hopefully imperceptibly, and volunteered myself as tribute. The questioning began. When did I get my first part time job? How many of my friends held a part time job? There were many questions, all of them unimportant, when right in the middle of the survey she stopped.

“Are you Chinese?”

I, too, stopped, and smiled. “Yes.”

It might seem like a very small thing, but for me, it is always nice to be recognized as my own race. Taking cues from my last name always leads to confusion, and I relish these moments when my name is divorced from my body and my features can stand alone and unbiased. And in this moment I was proud that the signals were no longer mixed.

And then she spoke again. Foreign words I could not understand gushed out, with a “do you speak Chinese” tagged onto the end of it. The girl looked at me smiling, expectantly.

I looked around for someone to save me. To my left was Stephanie, who had just noted that the food we were eating was like what she’d have at home, Taiwanese or Cantonese. Across from her was Alex, who, though decidedly not Asian, had just returned from a quarter abroad in Beijing. Next to Alex was Raymond, who was fluent in Chinese. But I
“I had to escape to seek FREEDOM,” my dad said as he concluded his reflections on his experience in Vietnam. “Freedom” (“Tự Do”) was a word that I heard often as a child. My dad used to tell me a lot of stories about Vietnam, but, most of the time, they would end the same way. “But now I am here, and therefore, you are here. And even though I miss home, at least we have freedom.” My bedtime stories included descriptions of the native land (Quê Hương)—luscious, green, and full of life. He may have talked about the time when he skipped school to play hooky (and later suffered the consequences) or he would talk about the time at a noodle street stall when his friend spat in his bowl of Phở so that my dad would give the bowl to him instead. He would always say, “But now I am here, and therefore, you are here,” after he finished his story. It was not often that I would still be awake by the end of one of his tales about the good ol’ days. During those nights when I was restless and refused to sleep; however, I was captivated by his memories; I was captivated by this land to which I felt only a slight connection; I was captivated by this distant war; I was captivated by his words.

I find myself struggling to determine an appropriate place to begin my dad’s narrative because I do not know how to best capture those memories: that place, that war, those words. After interviewing him and thinking about his life (and, of course, adding my own interpretations into the mix), I realize that my dad’s multiple identities—that of a son, a brother, a student, a solider, a lover, a refugee, a father, a husband—complicates his immigration story greatly. I will do my best to recount his story, but the numerous layers engulfing his life serve to blur the understanding of his experiences. In other words, my dad is not only a refugee; the refugee experience alone does not define his life in America now. The interactions of these different identities (and this is not yet including his political or ethnic identity) contribute to a more holistic appreciation of his immigration story.

Although my dad’s story began long before I came into this world, I would like to describe a situation in which Vietnam became more to me than just a place in one of my dad’s stories. In 1995, my dad received a video from his family in Vietnam of my grandpa’s (Ông Nội) Lễ Thượng Thọ ceremony. Although I cannot recall how old my grandpa was turning, I do remember vividly my youngest aunt indirectly telling my dad, in her introduction in the video, that it had been far too long and that it was time for my dad to come home to see his family. It was in that moment that I realized that my dad had an entirely different family in Vietnam. Moreover, it was in that moment that I realized that he had people waiting for him and depending on him. Naturally, I wondered why he was in America in the first place if all of these people were waiting for him in Vietnam and sending him videos imploring him to return home. But then, I remembered: Tự Do.

The next summer, in 1996, my dad and I packed our bags and flew back to Vietnam. He was 45 and I was 4. He was delighted to finally be able to step foot into his Quê Hương while I was a chubby toddler who cried constantly and obnoxiously about the humid weather, the relentless mosquitoes, and the unpleasant smells. It was the first time in nearly 20 years that he had been in his native land, however, and my dad let nothing spoil his trip.

My dad, Tran Dang Tho, was born on January 18, 1951 in North Vietnam. He is not too specific about where exactly in the North he was born, but he always asserts that although he was born in Bắc Việt Nam (which is why I call him Bô), he is truly from Miền Nam Việt Nam.

Truthfully, he and his family did move to Saigon when he was still quite young, so, in this sense, it
is understandable why he identifies more with the South. Though, this is not to say that he did not initially feel isolated as a person from the North who moved to the South.

"...My parents had brought me from a far flung village in North Vietnam to live in the city. At that time, as a three year old boy, I...had felt bewildered in a society full of modern commodities. My senses then were fully triggered, and I had watched in utter surprise as people rode two wheeler bicycles without falling off. Going to a movie for the first time, I had tried to jump out of the way when a gun on the screen was pointed in my direction, or when a car, also on the screen, carried out of control seemingly towards me. At school, I had felt lonely and lost when other children of my age had talked excitedly and expertly about Tarzan, Zorro, Burt Lancaster, John Wayne."

He and his family made the move from North to South after the Geneva Agreements were signed in 1954 and brought a temporary peace to Vietnam.

When reflecting on the Vietnam War, my dad rarely mentions what he thought were the motivations behind the effort. It is rare that speaks about his experience after the war much less during the war itself. He mentioned in passing a long time ago how much he has learned about the Vietnam War since he has come to the United States, but since I have gotten older, he does not tell me his thoughts on the matter anymore (because I will actually remember now). I do remember that he emphasized how different the Vietnamese government had looked to the Americans than to the Vietnamese people. He did not realize, for example, that Ngô Đình Diệm was a puppet for the United States—gaining power because of America and later dying with the support of Americans. One can only speculate (because he has certainly not told me) whether learning these facts have changed his view about the United States. One can only speculate whether his idea of Tư Do has changed.

In any case, he considers the actual Vietnam War as a conflict much larger in scope than he could ever describe. He sees it as an effort that occurred almost before his time. My dad considers himself as a part of a later generation. He was still a student in college when he was drafted into the South Vietnamese army in 1972 at the “encouragement of President Thieu.” He decided to join the army as a naval officer because he wanted to join a sector of the army where he would face the least amount of battle time. He knew that being on the front lines of the army was a sure death sentence and he wanted to find any way possible to avoid an early death. Furthermore, joining the navy meant needing to go to the naval academy for a couple more years—another opportunity to stay off of the battlefield. He, therefore, tested into a naval academy and attended one in Nha Trang for two years before graduating in September of 1974.

He became an official officer in the Vietnamese naval forces only 6 months before April 30, 1975—the Fall of Saigon or the “loss of our country.” Instead of fleeing the country immediately, like very many people—especially the naval officers who had access to ships—did, my dad decided to stay behind and find his family. He explains that out of the 186 men in his unit, around 180 of them decided to leave by ship when Saigon fell. When he worked as a research scientist in Ohio in the late 80’s, my dad wrote a brief account on his experiences after the Vietnam War.

“I made the greatest mistake of my life when I decided to stay behind and try to live with the communists at the time my country fell into their orbit in 1975. I can still vividly see
the chaotic attempts of my countrymen to escape in the last days of April 1975. Everyone tried every channel he knew to extricate himself in time from the communists’ grasp.

People ran in fear for their lives, as if confronted by a great herd of wild animals. In doing so, they left behind them all their belongings, their lives’ work, and even their parents, wives, and children.”

My dad references the moment when he decided to stay behind in his country often. In fact, the above passage is how he chose to begin his paper because it was the turning point in his life, he believes. Had he not made the decision to stay in Vietnam and had left when he had the chance, his life could be entirely different right now. Speculation, though, can occur at many places in one’s story. I do wonder, however, whether he still considers such a decision to be a mistake. He had said, after all, that he, “...was worried for [his] fate, but whenever [he] thought about [the] possibility of escape to another country, leaving [his] homeland permanently, and forever being separated from [his] parents and relatives, [he] felt a tremendously searing pain in [his] heart.” I hesitate to push my dad further on the issue, and he has not referred to his decision in such a way in a long time. My dad actually refers to his decision to stay very nonchalantly now—it is a fact of life. Instead of leaving along with his friends and fellow officers exactly on April 30th, he decided to stay because he did not want to leave his family; he did not want to start a new life by himself.

My dad describes the communist takeover on Black April and the days following as a relatively easy process for the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong were able to quell the few remaining pockets of resistance and began to occupy the military installations and strategic positions in the South. When I was younger, my dad included commentary on how the war may have turned out differently if only the Americans had not “abandoned us.” He surprisingly no longer mentions the U.S. decision to pull out of Vietnam anymore. As a child, my dad would constantly talk about the Fall of Saigon in terms of the U.S. decision to cease military support. My dad would bitterly mention anti-war “hippies” or celebrities like Jane Fonda who “supported the communists.” Although he was grateful for being able to escape persecution in Vietnam and for being able to find a new life in America, a part of him felt as though America owed the Vietnamese people at least this much. I believe my dad very much accepted as true the words that President Thieu uttered as he resigned from office just 9 days before the communist takeover of Saigon. President Thieu declared that his forces had failed to stop the advance of the Viet Cong because of lack of funds and support promised to him by the Americans. In a contemptuous attack on the United States, Thieu implied that the U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, had tricked him into signing the Paris peace agreement two years before, promising military aid which then failed to materialize. My dad has not mentioned the withdrawal of American troops in his stories to me for quite some time.

After the Fall of Saigon, my dad finally had the opportunity to really see the Viet Cong. He describes these new men who filled the streets as being mostly under the age of 20 and dressed in ill fitting uniforms. They looked dumbfounded by the wide streets, high density of people, and the busy traffic in Saigon. The city people looked at them in return with curiosity and shyness. My dad remembers a situation in which children approached the Viet Cong soldiers and began to ask them about life in the North.
“A young boy asked a soldier, ‘Is there TV in the North?’ ‘Yes, of course,’ the soldier said. ‘Every household has its TV.’ ‘And are there any Hondas in the street?’ ‘Of course, yes,’ he replied again. ‘There are plenty. The Hondas choke the traffic.’ Pondering for a while, the little boy asked, ‘Well, is there billiards in the North?’ ‘Yes, of course,’ the soldier maintained. ‘Billiards run on all the roads.’

The communist soldier then continued talking to the children, explaining that whatever the South had, the communist North also had, but in far greater quality.” My dad essentially presents this situation as a representation of what all the Viet Cong in the rural and less developed North believed.

My dad remembers the reactions of the people of Saigon to the Viet Cong very well. During the first days of occupation, the city people surreptitiously told one another of the boastfulness and the stupidity of the newly arrived soldiers. My dad explains how there were instances when the Viet Cong were seen using the water from toilet bowls to wash their faces and cook their meals. Some people even described instances when the Viet Cong lit their fires in the middle of houses. Even more ridiculous are stories of the Viet Cong putting fish into the toilet bowl and pushing the button—believing that the fish could be washed that way. “The city people whispered these stories to one another, and laughed in derision at the victors,” my dad says.

On June 26, 1975, my dad presented himself to the authorities by their order and enrolled in a course of political indoctrination that was supposed to end after 10 days. The next night he and other “students” were driven to an abandoned American base, two hundred kilometers from Saigon in Tay Ninh province.

“At the base, we were organized into squads and groups. During the first few days, we were called “Prisoners of war”, but soon afterwards, they called us “Re-education Student.” We had to fence ourselves with barbed wire into zones, each zone containing a battalion. Blazoned across the gate of every zone was the ubiquitous slogan, which said ‘NOTHING IS MORE PRECIOUS THAN FREEDOM.’”

He remembers the gate very well for it was what stood between him and freedom. The re-education students were not allowed to go on the other side of the gate unless armed guards accompanied them. Each zone within the re-education camp system was kept isolated from the others. On arrival, my dad and his fellow prisoners were required to write down all personal and family details. They were required to provide information about every single person in their family going back to their grandparents—both maternal and paternal. It was imperative that each person state the class to which his ancestors had belonged. If a relative was dead, the prisoner had to explain where his relative had died and what caused his or her death. My dad explains how they were forced to repeat this procedure dozens of times, “...so the cadres in the camps could compare our reports, and look for any inconsistencies.”

My dad does not go further in his verbal explanation about the re-education camps and tells me to refer to the paper he had written all those years ago about his experiences immediately following the war. To some extent, it is still difficult for him to verbalize all that had transpired. It is also difficult for him to explain his feelings during those times. As I was growing up, I had only ever heard two stories about my dad’s “prison days.”
One story explained why his index finger nail was rough and the other explained why my dad is now very picky with his food. He told neither story when I recently asked him about his experience in the camps. His essay, however, delves much more deeply into his experience than I had ever heard him recount. It is my belief that my dad’s re-education camp experience him more than many other events in his life. The traumatic experience has shaped the person that he is today greatly.

The process of political indoctrination began several months after their arrival to the re-education camp. My dad explains that their first lesson was titled, “The American Imperialists are the Number One Enemy of Our People and the People of the Entire World.” Just as the countries to the east of the Iron Curtain after World War II were considered hostile to the United States and to “democracy” overall, the capitalist block of Western European and Western Hemispherical countries were regarded as the enemy of the communists with the United States at the head. According to their “teachers,” American imperialists had their sights set on Vietnam ever since 1945. The Americans even went as far as to deliberately push the French out of Vietnam and to create multiple internal conflicts in the country.

My dad and his fellow prisoners were classified into categories: those who had blood debts to pay and those who did not. Pilots, artillery officers, commanding officers, officers involved in planning, and officers of the psychological warfare branch were classified into the first category. Officers in personnel and supply sections, specialists of the engineer corps, doctors, pharmacists, engineers, and foreign language teachers were classified into the second category.

He describes how many of the inmates suffered from severe nervous disorders due to the uncertainty of being in the camp and the intense psychological assault. As a result, there were men who, “...got up in the middle of the night, ran everywhere in the camp, and shouted slogans of adulation to the Party and to Uncle Ho.” Although many people managed to somehow escape, others died trying.

In terms of rations, my dad explains how green, boiled vegetables were their main food source at first. He insists that whoever has been in one of those camps will remember the taste of beri-beri. “My arms, my legs, my face were all bloated due to beri-beri.” He would dream about eating meat, fish, and sugar. Smokers in the camp dreamt of watching themselves smoke to their hearts’ content. Rats were a popular source of food. Every night the prisoners set traps around the camp to catch them. These huge sewer rats were briefly singed over a fire, and then skinned. Due to an order that forbade the prisoners to keep anything pointed or sharp or any iron pieces longer than twenty centimeters, my dad had to gut the rats with his fingers, yanking off and tossing away the head and four paws. He added five-spice powder, salt and lemon grass to the meat and barbecued the carcass. This barbecued meat was scarcely edible, but it was a good source of protein to help combat the prisoners’ malnutrition. Seeing snakes during the daytime was a pleasure for my dad. Snake, cooked in a rice broth, was a nutritious dish. Additionally, reptiles of all kinds did not escape the prisoners’ attention. The huntsman spiders, as big as a man’s thumb, normally paused early in the morning at the entrance of their caves to stalk their prey. My dad would capture them, put them in an empty condensed milk can, wave the can over the fire, and eat them. He dug for starchy roots and bulbs in the forest and ate bamboo shoots and other leaves to get as much energy as he could and to survive another
day in the camp.

“Our day began with physical exercises, then work. In the early evening, we had to meet again to discuss, criticize our thoughts, and criticize our performance at our laboring duties. Before and after each meeting we had to sing, clapping our hands in time to the music, a song honoring Uncle Ho and the party. We sang in the manner of devotees honoring Christ.”

The second phase of my dad’s re-education, and the phase that caused my father to lose a fingernail, was called “re-education through labor”. The prisoners were marched into the jungle to do manual work after they had to build, themselves, the inadequate tools with which they had to work. Their first job was to clear a path wide enough for vehicular traffic right into the forest.

“Our tools were so bad that we had to spend a lot of time to force just to saw through a tree trunk. The so-called saw only lasted five to ten traverses. After that it had to be extricated from the tree and the teeth re-bent alternately again, otherwise it just stuck fast in the wood.” The horrors of the re-education camp experience no doubt hugely impacted my dad. He has made it known that he does not like to remember the particulars of the experience. In February, 1979, my dad was able to escape from the camp. When I asked him for more details on the matter, he, once again, brushed me off by saying that the story is too complicated to get into. Due to my curiosity, I pushed him slightly on the matter and he told me that he was able to receive help from prisoners who had previously escaped. Instead of returning to the camp after a day of working in the jungle, my dad and a few others ran. Luckily, he met others who were preparing to escape the country by boat. Due to his experience in the navy, he was able to negotiate being the operator of the boat and gained passage aboard. He explained that his boat contained over 100 people. After days of drifting on the sea, the boat began to sink. By some force of fate, however, they were just off the coast of Malaysia where the Malaysian coast guard came to rescue them. My dad was then taken to the Pulao Bidong Refugee Camp where he stayed for nearly a year before gaining sponsorship to America.

“Tử Do,” he says. He mentions briefly some challenges that he encountered after arriving in America—language barriers, money woes, and unsupportive refugee/immigrant services. But the descriptions in his story end with his arrival to Pulao Bidong. When I asked him to elaborate on the challenges he faced in America, he told me that he was tired and that he would tell me some other time. He admitted that there were plenty of challenges in the United States after his arrival, and it made him miss Vietnam even more. “But now I am here, and therefore, you are here.” He wanted to end the story at that.
Chinese Characters

Mark Flores

Characters

Let the brush kiss
The parchment
Smooth and glossy
Trailings like whispers
Into lovers’ ears
Intimacy.

Let us pause the moment
In the seconds before
The touch
Before ink
Blossoming
Before
Marriage of
Present thought
Ancient form

Let us honor
The moment
When descendants become
Ancestors
Flow on
Like a river of
memories.

Let us pass on
Like artist’s skill
Carving characters
Binding meaning
Capturing essences

And let me watch
On the edge
As ink remains ink
Lost in translation
Lost in America
Lost to me.

So let me.
Tell them I have not abandoned
Them
Tell them
I have not given up
Please. tell them
I am lost
And I need direction
Like whispers
And cloudscapes
Into lovers’ ear
Intimacy.
Expatriate Stomach

Sibel Sayiner

I am a cross pollination of two seeds that flew further than intended an extra 5000 miles across the Atlantic ocean an Italian-Turkish first-gen whose name is Turkish-Italian I was raised in Philly with three tongues and an expatriate stomach my parents couldn’t tell me what it meant to be lonely in a country that couldn’t say hello to you in the right language but they could feed me the spiciest recipes they could find take me to houses full of haphazard English that could spoon feed me the immigrant experience where the food is only spicy enough if it makes you cry.

In the first grade, my teacher made me show the class a new Italian word every month so I pontificated on the beauty of the slightest elision of the s in casa I looked at all the white American kids who with great confidence in their new mastery of a foreign language pronounced it ca-sa school became another place I can be crafted into a cultural learning experience just pretend to care about the language: it’s the only beautiful part of Italy anyway, that, and the ruins.

When in college, I heard that the university wanted to open a study abroad in Istanbul, because it’s finally become hip enough to visit the one of the centers of civilization and now that it’s almost part of the EU, more European than Middle East, it must be perfectly safe, a wonderful educational experience for privileged students who will never touch a drop of the Black Sea right across the Bosphorus from Istanbul is my family’s hometown I wonder if they’ll ever see a wandering student an iPhone playing pop music in one hand and Starbucks latte in the other looking for real baklava, looking for the true Turkish experience.

I am simultaneously an exoticized immigrant and a white American my first-generation friends do not have my light skin and subtle features they do not pass for anything other than their parents’ oral history and though I have never been stopped at an airport like they have the Americans scan and stop my first name on their tongue, they giggle at the con-sequences of my phonetic pronunciation, and ask where are you from? I can’t place your accent, your features, you cannot be more complex than your skin.

But my stomach can handle more than this acid with which you try to erase my family history I wonder if the white girls can taste the spicy on my tongue
or see the seven time zones in my eyes
I have been fed the heat of the expatriate
and this heartburn will never cease.
Grandma

Justin Lam

The way she clutches her black designer purse
with which she will be buried when she dies
it’s probably worth more than everything
she’s ever owned in her life
put together.

She’s never received an education
And yet she is regal.
She says that she is useless
but to me she is priceless.

Her gold rimmed glasses
and jade earrings
and bracelet,
her soft, wrinkled hands
that once carried me as a baby.

Her eyes are deep
and sometimes I’m scared
to look into them
into someone who I don’t completely understand.

Sometimes when she says things,
I get the general meaning
and I’ll just nod
and smile.

It’s kind of like her feelings for me
I know what she generally feels
but I can’t be sure.

I know she misses me,
even though she tells me not to call.

She once told me that if she ever wanted to see me,
all she had to do was look into her heart.

There are some things that cannot be communicated.
Language gets in the way.

And then some things that don’t have to be communicated.

All I need is that feeling
And I know.
He is stubborn
with his full head of silverback hair,
his gruff voice, and substantial paunch.

He doesn’t move with his once youthful quickness,
but each step is sturdy,
a foundation that runs deep from years of sailing,
he’s kept his sea legs even
though his socks are cut open at the mouths
and the laces of his hiking boots hang loose.

He doesn’t say much
and when he does, I only half understand,
sometimes in English and sometimes in shanghaiese,
his droopy jowls and severe face
hide the care and love that I know exists,
because of the way he bursts out laughing sometimes like the happy buddha of longevity
on my mantle,
because of the way he refuses food that we offer him
so we can have more to eat,
because of the way he tells us not to call,
but then as we are leaving
he cracks open
the door again
to see if we
have made it
to the elevator
safely.
Mother do you remember...

Anonymous

Mother do you remember…
The sound of flowing yellow rivers
Carving their way through fertile silt valleys
Paddies toiled and tilled by the weathered hands
Of forefathers yellowed by a relentless sun
Who along with each seedling, planted new hopes
Dreamed of future prosperity, plentiful harvests
Shared with a long lineage of dutiful sons and obedient daughters
****

Mother do you remember…
How the yellow rivers ran red
With the blood of innocent millions
Babies ripped from their mother’s breast
Mutilated bodies of disheveled women, battered and bruised upon the ground
Amongst queues of decapitated heads, ripped from shoulders
Men slaughtered like animals and
Discarded like trash
Hunger withered corpses
Their mouths agape
Like animals waiting to be fed
Their bodies dried like Scorched Earth
Amongst the rotting stench of rigor mortis
Lay the quiet remnants of long-ago ancestral dreams
Smothered by smoke and asphyxiated by ash
Just another casualty of war
****

Mom, do you remember…
Escaping by night
In that rickety old junk that surreptitiously sat beside the old harbor
Shining bright like salvation
That’s where you met Baba
The two of you, children aged by war
Hands held so tightly for fear of one more loss
I imagined loving gazes into sad, brown eyes
With Thousand Yard Stares
Two refugees made lovers, a love
Derived from the essence of human hatred
Sitting upon that rickety old junk to take you away
Away. Anywhere. Anywhere but
Those valleys of red-yellow rivers
****

Mama, do you remember…
Me, your daughter
The one with baba’s high nose and your big ears
They will bring you very good fortune you’d say
As I cried from cruelty bred in young children
And the almond eyes that made you remember a mother long last
In a land of yellow rivers that carve their way through fertile silt valleys

****

Mommy
Are you still there?
Trapped somewhere in the recesses of your mind
Sitting in a corner
Silenced by a stroke of bad luck
Ruminating that your ears have not brought you that promised good fortune
Only the gifts of age,
Though it is a gift not to be forsaken
For they were withheld from those dear brethren
Whose bodies lay in unmarked graves
Their angry spirits haunting, searching, remembering
The sound of flowing yellow rivers
Carving their way through fertile silt valleys
Punta

Debra Tisoy Pacio

We are two points on a plane
Where lines may never connect.
Because as you wait in line, you grow farther and farther.

Now on separate planes,
Different planes,
Distant planes.
Me on the ground,
As you board the plane.
And it is plain to me, that there is no line
But an airline, that connects us.

And it is not a game you board, but a game board.
We are players played by the master hands,
Mastering our lands,
Square by square, each square foot of land,
While pulling our players off like pawns, and
Pawning our people off elsewhere.

Just know,
That as you board,
I will never grow bored.
Nor tired, nor weary.
Though teary-eyed with stifled sighs I’ll be.
While teaching our son his 1,2,3s, ABCs, LEP
–He’ll know.

He’ll know, that there is no line, but the one in front of him now
Where you stand, and where you will stand.
I hope he understands,
Why.
That as you look back, there is no turning back.
The visa has been checked, the board has been set,
And those master hands, mastering our mastered lands
Have a checkmate,
And I cannot check mine.

We are two points on a nonexistent line.

One point for me, one point for you,
Two points.
Punta.

Because in Tagalog, there is no difference
Between come, and go.
*Pupunta ikaw.*
*Pupunta ako.*

In her introductory language guide titled *Tagalog for Beginners*, Professor Joi Barrios writes, “Remember that in Filipino, there is no difference between the words come and go, they have the same equivalent, *punta*” (156). Every day, 4,700 Filipinos leave the Philippines in search of work to support their families. This poem is dedicated to Overseas Filipino Workers who endure the effects of forced migration, including family separation, under the Labor Export Policy.

Reader

_Sunli Kim_

do you know that demon
it’s called it settles in the

insides (viscera, visceral): word bank no. 436 cramped fingers
around my esophagus
around my lungs “squeeze squeeze squeeze” in syncopated rhythms it seduces;
cuts my wind my god have you ever drowned in no water --

do you know it?
do you know that

I write these words knowing
my mothers and fathers before me

do not know it.

My mother’s head lies in her hands and
my father is a myth but his hands blister
i can only ask
elementary, basic...

How are you, beginning instruction pg. 1 word bank no. 2

No eat Buddha, no eat Buddha! You are pretty. They butcher our tongues and I smile but
when my parents speak lilting they are cold, Can you repeat that again I don’t under-
stand you learn to speak English good and I sweat – their speech – I must be in charge
– of language for them but – selfish – speak for me –

She is the quiet one.

Choke root words and communicate
fragments cold.

We of orphan words drown on the shore.

(Don’t worry the water is only frigid under) i think “it does not hold the light of the
words
of my past five hundred years and their pasts” and still I must endure

the fear of a hybrid of our tongues.
Tiger Mom

Mark Flores

My family is my mother
with her jet black hair
and eyes so brown
they are obsidian

her face is smooth
and ageless
her body
is stunted
bony
and jointed.

She is my mother,
And I forget she is
Not invincible

She is a tiny
Porcelain doll
5 feet
she tells me to grow
strong
like an ox,
like her.

She says
Do not go
Chasing dragons
They have not brought
Luck
As the oxen do

She tells me
To only chase clouds
If my feet is on the ground
And I know often
My feet have been planted
On her back
She does not grimace but smile
My mother is strong like an Ox.

My mother is willing
To till the fields
As her life falls into
grooves
Years slipping
As we steal
Her
Youth
from her.

My mother
Gives everything
Asks for none
She does not praise me,

I am her son
And she shows her love
With her aching back
More genuine
Than words.

So do not call her tiger
Or dragon
She is my mother
She is an ox.

Do not laugh
When she feels she must shout;
her overeager
Presence in my life
Or the scars
Her body bears
From my birth

I will not be
ashamed
of her
strength.
VISUAL ART
The Crescent Moon

Sophia Sattar
Untitled Illustration

Thanh D. Nguyen
There are days in 2014 when I read about
Somalian and Eritrean boat refugees
drowning in the Mediterranean, trying to reach Italy
the remains of a burned village in Myanmar
where skulls of Rohingya Muslims are discovered
the detention of Middle Eastern people
who arrived on the Australian shore, only to be sent to Papua New Guinea
And I remember
who a refugee is (Mother, Father)
what a war looks like (street shootings, napalm explosions)
where the “unlucky” end up (in the Gulf of Tonkin, or scattered across a field)
when, for national interest, the U.S. denies refugee status (El Salvador, Nicaragua)
why I major in Ethnic Studies, though my mother cannot pronounce it (Ethics? Philosophy?)
Grace Chao is a senior majoring in English with a Creative Writing emphasis. Though she has written mostly creative nonfiction and journalistic pieces, she hopes to write more fiction in the future. She is an intern at Stanford magazine, a fan of crossword puzzles, classical music, and trivia, and loves Lolita and Murakami’s Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World. She will work at Discovery Girls magazine in the summer, and return in the fall to complete her Master’s degree in English.

Mark Flores is a sophomore double majoring in English and Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, at least for now. When he grows up (more), he wants to spend the rest of his days spending time with the kids he hopes he’ll have, but until then, he’ll settle for writing, eating cookies, and meeting the people that will teach him the color of joy. If you’d like to find him, he’ll probably be in class, reading, or in the midst of another minor identity crisis, and is always up for a game of Munchkins.

Huan He graduated from Dartmouth College in 2013 with a major in English Literature and a minor in Film & Media Studies. He pursued an honors thesis that tied together his interests in Asian American studies, queer studies, and diasporic and transnational studies. He has also been an active leader in Dartmouth’s Asian/Asian American students community. Currently, he works in New York City and hopes to attend graduate school for Literature and Cultural/Ethnic Studies in the near future.

Sunli Kim is a junior studying English Literature.

Yoo Jung Kim is a graduating senior at Dartmouth College. Her work in genetics has been published by Nature and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. She is currently writing a book for the University of Chicago Press. Ultimately, she hopes to attend medical school and further her research on blood cell derived cancers.

Thanh D. Nguyen is a finishing up his last year at Stanford University. If he can get his act together in the next three weeks, he should have a BA in Comparative Studies in Race & Ethnicity and MA in Modern Thought & Literature. Throughout his time in college, he has done a number of things one may find morally, socially, and physically questionable. These things include buying pillow pets as a matter of stress relief, arriving in a foreign country without arranging housing, and not showering as a punishment for not meeting thesis deadlines. After graduation, he’s going to the Beyoncé and Jay-Z concert, but that’s about all he has figured out.
Debra Tisoy Pacio is a junior majoring in English Literature. She enjoys writing poetry and is a member of Stanford’s Pilipino American Student Union (PASU).

Sophia Sattar was born in Karachi, Pakistan. She has earned her MFA in the graduate school of painting at the Academy of Art University in 2012. Sophia was nominated in the Emerging Art Series at the Academy for 2013. She is an ambassador of Muslimah: Art and Voices at the International Museum of Women, San Francisco. Through which she continues to bring goodwill between her culture and the West.

Sibel Sayiner is a Junior majoring in Bioengineering and Classics in Philosophy & Literature and a spoken word poet who performs in the Bay Area and competes nationally. She has published in Tandem Vol II, has featured in Breaking Up//Deconstructing Love Showcase, and has competed at CUPSI as part of Slamford in 2013 and 2014. She is also the current director of the Stanford Spoken Word Collective. You can find more of her work at risksinnumbers.tumblr.com

Ken Savage is a senior majoring in Drama and also a co-terminal M.A. student in Communication. He has served as the Artistic Director of Asian American Theater Project for the last two years, with whom he produced and directed the first student musical in Bing Concert Hall, an Asian re-imagination of the classic Broadway musical My Fair Lady. He is the recipient of the 2014 Asian American Award for Special Achievement and also the Lloyd W. Dinkelspiel Award for distinctive contributions to undergraduate education. Originally from San Francisco, Ken aspires to be a professional director on Broadway and internationally.

Van Anh Tran is currently a graduate student in the Stanford Teacher Education Program. After joining the Stanford Asian American Activism Committee (SAAAC) and working with inspiring community organizations both in the Bay Area and LA, Van Anh has developed a passion for community building and community organizing within the many communities at Stanford and beyond. She hopes to encourage her students to become involved in their communities and to take action!

Hye Jeong Yoon is currently a senior majoring in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity set to graduate in 2015, hopefully with a coterminal master’s degree. She is interested in representations of Asian Americans in pop culture and media, especially through an intersectional lens, sometimes because she can’t make up her mind, but mainly because she believes that the only way to truly understand representation is through an interdisciplinary, intersectional approach. She hopes to continue her travails in academia through research on young “hipster” Asian American musicians in the music industry.

Biographies unavailable: David Bradshaw, Sandy Seing Chang, and Justin Lam