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Author

Chan, Hannah I

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An Imposter in My Own Home

The Intertwining of Trauma and Identity in Asian-American Literature

Hannah Chan

English, University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract

Oppression does not only occur in the physical space— it also dominates the literary realm. While the majority enjoys the fruits of narrative plentitude, minority groups— most often including Asian-American writers— experience the obstacle of narrative scarcity within dominant society. Due to this identity strung together by oppression and institutionalized colonialism in literary studies, minority writing is forced to assume a kind of antagonism, a prefab agony about being invariably misunderstood. Minority writers— specifically Asian-American writers— are forced to embrace their trauma placed upon them by institutional hardships as their only outlet of writing, as if their generational lesions are only embraced to provide literary entertainment. The value of their voice and their writing is therefore based upon how distressing and damaging their experience of growing up as Asian-American may be. As this issue of the paradox of the Asian-American identity is rooted within the model minority discourse and has now been exacerbated through the xenophobic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is this struggle of belligerent erasure in Asian-American literature that has not only aided in its misrepresentation and representation but has affected the understanding of one's identity between their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Through a hybrid of critical analysis and a personal narrative poem, this paper researches the dichotomy of the Asian-American identity through two celebrated Filipino-American writers and their contrasting works of literature— Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* and Elaine Castillo's *America is Not the Heart*— by illustrating the physical and internal struggle of being Filipino and American while simultaneously being both Filipino-American as they are explored in different yet similar mechanisms.

What makes a house a home?¹

home

my motherland, my home
a distant land, the place of my roots
where the blood of my ancestors flowed
through time
where my parents and grandparents grew up
where they willingly left their home
in search of opportunity.

a place that I long for
and I wish I knew more about
the place of my roots
that my school and education
never talk about

the home of my identity
but what about the other?
a constant battle
I feel I am losing.

house

my homeland, my house
the place i live, the land of my birth
where my tears stain as markers of
wasted time
where i grew up
where i was willfully raised in my house
in search of identity.

a land I have struggled to love
and know too much about
the land of my birth
where school and education
are the only subjects talked about

where my identity is housed
but what about the other?
a constant battle
I know I am winning.

An Imposter in My Own Home: The Intertwining of Trauma and Identity in Asian-American Literature

"All wars are fought twice— first on the battlefield and then in our collective memory." - Viet Thanh Nguyen

Our collective memory is constructed from manifold narratives, with most told from the point of view of the majority. The stories of the majority are shared and celebrated in every way possible, filled with an abundance of synonyms and adjectives to fully encompass the weight of their idolized narrative. A

¹ While separate, both poems are meant to be read alongside each other from line to line (ex: "My motherland, my home... "My homeland, my house", etc.).

White writer's yearning to be heard is already set at ease as they are given endless white pages to encompass each and every word of their stories. However, while the majority enjoys the fruits of narrative plentitude, minority groups—most often including Asian-American writers—experience the obstacle of narrative scarcity within the dominant society. Even within literature, they are oppressed. They are silenced. Their voices are stuck within the spine of the novel, bound between the leather as the latter is plastered onto every blank space, filling each page with letters and letters of newly consumed oppression. The voices are fighting for air, fighting for a voice, fighting to be heard, yet are continuously shut each time the reader allows the front and back covers to meet. Each page is a chance to be heard, but is also a chance to prolong the silence.

Why is it only in our memory where the truth can be surfaced? Why do we, Asian-American writers, always have to be *heard*? Why can't we just be *read*? Due to this identity strung together by oppression and institutionalized colonialism in literary studies, minority writing is forced to assume a kind of antagonism, a prefab agony about being invariably misunderstood. Minority writers—specifically Asian-American writers—are forced to embrace the trauma placed upon them by institutional hardships as their only outlet of writing, as if their generational lesions are only embraced to provide literary entertainment. The value of their voice and their writing is therefore based upon how distressing and damaging their experience of growing up as Asian-American may be. As this issue of the paradox of the Asian-American identity is rooted within the model minority discourse and has now been exacerbated through the xenophobic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this system of oppression further calls upon the value that Asian-American literature holds. However, it is this struggle of belligerent erasure in Asian-American literature that has not only aided in its misrepresentation and representation but has affected the understanding of one's identity between their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Through the eyes of two celebrated Filipino-American writers and their most acclaimed works of literature—Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* and Elaine Castillo's *America is Not the Heart*—each author illustrates the dichotomy of the Asian-American identity by illustrating the physical and internal struggle of being Filipino *and* American while simultaneously being *both* Filipino-American as they are explored in different yet similar mechanisms. I will first lead this argument by defining the formation of the Asian-American identity through the vast journey of once being the model minority to now being today's public enemy due to the onslaught of xenophobia brought upon by COVID-19. I will then connect how this conflict brought upon by societal stereotypes further affects the Asian-American writer's literary journey and concept of identity (as being both represented in physical literature while also being misrepresented in the literary consciousness). I will make this connection by examining the juxtaposition of Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, which focuses on tangible personal literature and its connection to the American Dream, and Castillo's *America is Not the Heart*, which instead revolves around the encompassing of spoken language and the vast world of Filipino dialects, as their mediums for building a cohesive yet acceptable identity in the American cognizance. A written poem regarding my own personal narrative experience as a first-generation, Asian-American writer is also intertwined throughout my analysis.

The Model Minority Myth and COVID-19: The Formation of the Asian-American Identity

In order to uncover the binary coexistence of one's racial and ethnic identity, the recognition of the model minority myth must be acknowledged. The model minority myth, which is the societal belief that Asian-Americans are high achievers with evidence of high success of the 'American Dream', leaves the notion of success to be narrowly defined. Think of Asian-centered stereotypes that are present within society: What do they involve? Often, they demand the "dedicated, disciplined, and very bright Asian student who has neither extracurricular interests nor social needs who are perceived to be content with academic accomplishments", unlike white Americans who attend college to pursue their dreams and goals (Shi 357). However, as positive as their aggressions may seem, Frank H. Shih asserts that "racial stereotypes, even those meant to be complementary, tend to dehumanize individuals" and place borders around their identity and who they are truly meant to be, while also weaponizing this matter to pit radicalized communities against one another (Shi 359). At the same time, while the perception of Asians as "perpetual foreigners" has declined due to their emergent role in capitalist globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this new way of thinking, resulting in the rise of new fears and insecurities regarding Asian-Americans.

Embracing one's identity as both Asian and American, therefore, is a feat that often proves difficult for many. While Asians are now coincidentally the face of immigration and the "model minority", they are still deemed in modern media as they were in history; "Asian" is a catch-all category despite including tremendous heterogeneity. Jennifer Lee and Kathick Ramakrishnan's article "From Narrative Scarcity to Research Plentitude for Asian-Americans" not only discusses the modern struggle of the lack of minority perspective in literature, but also calls upon the ethnic and racial bounds that now occur in modern society due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The mere reference to COVID-19 as the "China Virus" reinvigorated xenophobia "enough to offset more than three years of declines", she expresses, as Donald Trump's assertion of this label "reanimated a century-old racist and xenophobic trope that Asians are foreign vectors of filth and disease, and exposed the precariousness of their status" (Lee 10). Now faced with the perilousness of their racial status, many Asian Americans are forced to confront the brutal realization that economic privilege and proximity to Whiteness are no shields against racist and nativist hate. They must construct a new identity based on this retraction of prerogative internalization.

From the growing calls to understand the historical roots of anti-Asian racism in the formation of the American nation, the understanding of what it means to be "Asian-American" has recently been called into question in society. One's "house" and "home"—or "motherland" and "homeland"—are not mutually exclusive. Whether it stems from the repercussions of the minority myth discourse that is situated within Asian-American diasporic history or the blatant erasure of Asians in literature, the identity crisis many Asian-Americans face is swept away due to factors such as these, and their identity between their ethnic and racial backgrounds only continues to be muddled. The understanding of identity is central to living rapturously in daily life; the importance of literature is not often credited as a major role in one's identity until one realizes that there is none to begin with. This issue has been understood to affect those in the "in-betweens" of identity. Due to the lack of literary sources, there is nothing to call upon for comfort or reliability in the educational sector, the societal sector, and the

sector of the self. What binds Asian Americans together, conversely, is the history of exclusion they face as neither fully “Asian” nor fully “American” as solidified in literature through Bulosan’s *America is In the Heart* and Castillo’s *America is Not the Heart*.

the home of “my people”
or so I am told
but would I belong
in the home I never lived in?

the place of “many people”
for it is what I have learned
but do I truly belong
in the house I was raised in?

sometimes I sit and wonder
what would have been
had my family not left
had they loved their home
rather than longing
for a house

sometimes I sit and wonder
what could have been
had my family been born here
had this been their home
rather than living
in someone else’s house

would I have any opportunities?
would I yearn for higher education?
what would I be?
if I had lived at home,
would I be longing for
what would have been?

could I have had better opportunities?
could my education be better?
who would I be?
if my house was my home,
could I still have questioned
who i am?

Explain Yourself, Your World, Your People: Asian-American Writers on the Asian-American Journey

Asian American writers who found success were often entangled within a publisher’s net of adopting one or two writers every few years as the sole representatives of a culture, with many being East Asian. Because there are so few writers accepted into the mainstream media, many of the individuals who aim for the same success are saddled by expectations from the literary world and are read through an almost sociological framing: “Explain yourself, your world, your people.” The literary merit of Asian-American writers, therefore, lives within their commitment to writing about their personal struggles.

Their literary voice—if there is such a thing—speculates this binary. Celeste Ng, the writer of the renowned novel *Little Fires Everywhere*, ponders this evolution: “There was a sense of, you have to choose between an Asian identity and an American one. And what I’m seeing now in literature by Asian Americans is this idea of, can you be both? How can you coexist in both of those worlds rather than feeling maybe torn trying to carve out a space for yourself?” It is difficult to move past trauma when the only journey to societal acceptance and success involves constantly reliving it. The brutality of this system, which glorifies the abrasions inflicted upon them, essentially rejects the notion that Asian-American writers are *only* limited to the Asian-American genre. This static feeling of racial self-hatred—an effect of the combination of covert and overt racism—is what leads to sentiments of internalized oppression and shame. It reflects a never-ending cycle, circling the edges of a trap that often appears in Asian-American consciousness: love is suspicious, but being unloved is even worse. To occupy this conflicted position calls upon recognizing the delicate balance between one’s racial, ethnic, and national identity.

The conjunction of the Asian American identity can be perceived as a mosaic of fragments; although broken, it is still art. Through the works of two world-renowned Filipino-American writers—Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart* and Elaine Castillo’s *America is Not the Heart*—the association of memory, trauma, and agents of identity are explored in these contrasting texts, as well as their proximity and welcoming to “Americanness”. The titles themselves reflect this anomaly. Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart*, which was published in 1946, describes the complexity of his journey from the Philippines to the United States. As one of the first and most blatant accounts of immigration from an Asian American perspective, it not only showcases the reality and weight of the vitriolic racism Filipinos faced in America, but illuminates the struggle between being Filipino, being American, and its intersection as a work laborer in California. Carlos Bulosan himself is one of the most prominent figures in Asian American history and was unaware of his place in the American hierarchy, as this was written during a time when the minority myth was first surfacing. The texture and complexity within his narratives of racial encounters and feign for the acceptance of America showcase the intersectionality between being Filipino in America and also being American in the Philippines. This envelopment of the American identity occurred along with his choice to create art out of his trauma through the medium of literature: “This is the greatest responsibility of literature: to find in our struggle that which has a future. Literature is a living and growing thing... All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—We are America!” (Bulosan 136). Literature, in this case, encompasses a new sense of identity, one that involves the acceptance from the collective and a chance to fight back. He expresses how he could “fight the world now with my mind, not merely with my hands. My weapon could not be taken away from me any more. I have a chance to survive the brutalities around me” (Bulosan 161). Through his liberation from peasantry to a mindful poet, Bulosan recounts his relationship with literature as a great strength; his ability to read and write in English became the strongest weapon in his arsenal. His mental horizon widened as he learned from his surrounding social forces and reacted to “his time” in his art. Through Walt Whitman’s passionate dream of an America of equality for all races, Bulosan questions if “it would be possible for an immigrant like me to become a part of the American Dream” (Bulosan 179). After physically inserting himself into the wavelength by proclaiming himself an “American poet”, he proclaims his position as the epitome of the American

Dream and the prized immigrant. By creating both mental space to process these emotions and physical room to illustrate these traumatic experiences in the art form of literature, this specific example personifies the immigrant struggle of being at the mercy of both the ethnic and national identity while also acknowledging its unique intersection. As he tries his best to fit within the bounds of the white-dominated hierarchy while simultaneously grasping the spacial awareness of Filipino-Americans and their differing environments, Bulosan's idealistic pursuit of the American Dream highlights the struggle of the United States' supposed commitment to liberty and equality within the harsh reality of a prejudiced society.

On the other hand, Castillo's America is not the ultimate utopia of freedom and success: there is poverty, unfairness, and snobbery. Her generational novel highlights the sweeping tale of Hero de Vera, who escapes the poverty, political unrest, and martial law of the late-twentieth-century Philippines for the Bay Area. Nurses, communist activists, guerilla fighters, and grouchy children encapsulate the character list to not only reveal the tale of an immigrant, but of a *teleserye* (Filipino drama tv show), a bisexual romance, an origin story, and a historical narrative. Rather than interacting with the physicality and tangibility of literature as Bulosan does to exert his "Americanness", Castillo instead uses the movement entangled within language to represent her identity as a Filipino immigrant and an American citizen. The use of English, an inclusion of Spanish, and untranslated Tagalog, Ilocano, and Pangasinan—three of the thousands of the dialects in the Philippines—shows Castillo's refusal to participate in the homogenization of Filipino heritage by drawing on the country's rich linguistic diversity of the diaspora, rather than engaging in the colonialist convention of erasing all languages other than English. For instance, she recalls her hesitant attitude to move between languages depending on the person she is talking to. In the case of her cousin Paz, she is unsure of "whether or not to use English or Tagalog" because she "had a habit of speaking to Roni [her daughter] in a mixture of English, Tagalog, and Pangasinan" (Castillo 39). However, while it was easy for Roni to discern interchangeably between both languages "because nobody had told her otherwise", for Hero "listening to the mixture was like listening to a radio whose transmission would occasionally shorten out; she'd get half a sentence, then nothing—eventually the intelligible parts would start back up, but she'd already lost her place" (Castillo 39). In a way, it is almost as if Hero is a foreigner in her own country due to the divergent dialects that the Philippines embraces. Her choice to incorporate the large number of dialects— even those she may not understand—showcases how language is her choice of medium to indicate her submission to not only the American identity, but to different aspects of the Filipino realm, much like literature was to Bulosan's subjugation to America. The convergence of all of these identities through the personification of a multilingual maze, dipping between fluency and incomprehension, is a particularly vivid way of expressing both the difficulty and beauty of belonging to an immigrant community. Through the barriers of communication caused by trauma, class, and language, Castillo emulates the struggle to maintain a cohesive sense of self in search of a new identity.

While both novels recall the struggle of identity, they first found success as the past and present premier texts of the Filipino-American experience. Bulosan suggests that the potential of America has not yet been realized and that America is an unfinished project that everyone must invest in; Castillo suggests that America (both as a place and as an ideal) is not an almighty force with the potential to forge

community and national unity. The book's epigraph includes a quote from Bulosan's novel that not only gives work to both their titles, but to disparate idealisms behind the American dream:

"America is not a land of one race or one class of men. We are all Americans that have toiled and suffered and known oppression and defeat, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea pickers... America is in the hearts of men that died for freedom; it is also in the eyes of men that are building a new world."

By quoting Bulosan and referencing his novel in her title, Castillo announces that her book is not only the story of Hero but the story of a country. It should be a country that celebrates diversity as that is all it has known, yet it shuns this distinction away in contrast to homogeneity. It should be a country that values the hearts of those that only beat to be accepted by them, yet it eliminates any sense of acceptance. While many immigrants such as Bulosan gave the country the benefit of the doubt, Hero occupies the new world predicted by Bulosan's idealistic young man, but does so on her own terms. She encompasses her narrative through a single quote: "She'll grow up knowing that the only reason she's alive is because she was born in America—though she doesn't seem to love America anymore or less for that reason. Then again, she doesn't have to love it. She's of it." This quote envelops the dichotomy of a first-generation Filipino-American completely; while she was fortunate enough to be born as an American citizen, it does not mean that she has to love a country that does not love her back. On the other hand, Bulosan accounts his struggle of being born in the Philippines and immigrating to the United States as that of physical and mental turmoil in the midst of racial crime, injustice, and inequality. He recounts how he is guilty of a crime—"The crime is that I am a Filipino in America"—due to the overgrown belief that Filipinos were dirty and incapable of being civilized, their identity holding the same weight as a criminal (Bulosan 73). As he comes into his identity as a writer, he not only understood the idealistic values he placed on himself and the land of the free after migrating to America, but he recognized the deceptiveness behind evangelizing the American Dream. He explains this virtue by writing to the white people in his narrative: "You see us, and you think you know us, but our outward guise is more deceptive than our history" (Bulosan 95). American people believed in their stereotypes so gleefully that they categorized them in their own makeshift ways to feel comfortable, yet they are the same people who forced them to be confined within these boxes of colonized impertinence.

It is difficult to discern whether the perception regarded in Castillo's *America is Not the Heart* is the truth to the identity crisis placed on Filipino Americans today, or if Bulosan's utopian beliefs in *America Is in the Heart* truly encapsulate the politically driven idea of the American Dream. Each author omitted their own mechanism of creating what Elaine Kim calls,

"claiming America for Asian Americans" (Kim 88). This claim to reinvent the Asian-American identity—which is, after all, a method of white racism to group nationalities and nativities together—means "inventing a new identity, defining ourselves according to the truth instead of a racial fantasy, so that we can be reconciled with one another in order to celebrate our marginality" (Kim 88). Both Bulosan and Castillo reinvent their identities and relationships in contrasting ways, yet still embrace their own definition and journey of what being Asian-American translates into. For instance, Yuan Shu reflects how some texts may "embrace the American Dream and promote or challenge 'Asian values'" as

Bulosan does in his novel, while others like Castillo “document the specific Asian-American experiences in American history, how they negotiate the dominant culture in their own ways, and what sense of the changing reality of Asian-American they have envisioned” (Shu 95-96). The Asian-American writer exists on the margins of their own marginal community, wedged between the hegemonic culture and the non-English speaking communities unconcerned with self-definition. By including literature that pushes back against the one-dimensional narratives in which stereotypes, tropes, and dated assumptions about Asian Americans prevail, the identity crisis most Asian Americans face will no longer be seen as an individual foreign issue, but rather a collective experience that is present within this diverse paradox.

elaine castillo, dawn mabalon, carlos bulosan
they who are as writers
minoritized.

Shakespeare, Woolf, Joyce
they who are as writers
Deified.

ako ay nag-iisip, sa gayon ako ay
there are within stories within me, but never leave
housed in the home of an imposter
if I could speak the language of my blood
I too would free the poetry within me

I think therefore I am.
if I could speak the language of my blood
my feet would trace the path they walked
and stake me a name within their fame
a home of jade and gold, & carve my name

I wished I lived in a house
in my beautiful country,
for I recognize its sun
but not the climate.
how can I weather this storm
if I have never seen real rain?
you are the home I wish I knew.

I wish my home
was not this prideful country.
I know the sun
and I feel its warmth.
but how will its rays break through
the pillowing clouds of darkness?
you are the only home I have ever known.

My bahay, my house.

Identity is not a prescriptive solution. However, while it may be helpful to sort through ready-made categories (even if they may choose to reject them in the future), the ability to create and adopt your own narrative without boundaries allows for a greater chance to encompass and accept all aspects of one’s identity. By recognizing the mutual kinship with others who struggle against domination, Asian-

American writers are able to claim the duality of their identity. They must piece together and sort out the meaning of one's past—whether it be from shreds of stories heard in childhood or from faded photographs that have never been explained—and the restoration of the foundation of one's racial and ethnic identity must be explored. While it may not be understood, it must be consciously acknowledged in order to recognize the binary divergence of the Asian-American identity.

There is a power in being able to recognize our struggles as the result of lived paradoxes rather than viewing them as purely private failings. It is not enough to have one Chinese writer amongst an entire bookshelf of white authors; that is not inclusion, it is subjugation. This is where the importance of Asian-American literature comes in. If American fiction is going to be deserving of the title of 'inclusion', then it has to encompass the America that exists beyond its borders, the Americas that make it the land it is today. Cathy Park Hong encapsulates this motion perfectly: "If the Asian American consciousness must be emancipated, we must free ourselves of our conditional existence" (Hong 2020). The two identities are divergent, yet completely intertwined in a way that is both freedom and assimilation. They can never be fully distinct, which allows for their true malleability. It is a step toward imagining lives that we might be the authors of with endings that we write ourselves. Because as long as we continue to uphold the belief that the only recipe for Asian American literary success consists of reliving your trauma for entertainment, we will never have an American readership that fully accepts us as writers in congruence to American reality, or the identities and people it has and is still producing. People like me. Hi.

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