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OTHERHOOD: TRACING CHILDHOOD
IN KOREAN AMERICAN LITERATURE FOR YOUTH

NINA HANEE JANG

142 Pages

In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which childhood is represented in three Korean American narratives for youths—An Na’s *the Fold*, Lyla Lee *I’ll Be the One*, and Tae Keller’s *When You Trap a Tiger*—to theorize the concept of *Otherhood* as a childhood in which the experience of being Othered is fundamental to a young person’s evolving identity formation and sense of power. I analyze how one’s identity makes a profound impact on their process of growth while their ontological awareness, sense of community, and heritage contribute to their empowerment as an Other. Following this analysis, I apply my understanding of *Otherhood* to teaching and examine the ways in which diverse literature for youth has mediated my teaching practices, and I theorize a pedagogical framework to build a safer and more equitable learning environment where students can learn about social justice issues and work toward creating a change in our culture.

KEYWORDS: childhood; youth; Korean; Korean American; Other; minority.

OTHERHOOD: TRACING CHILDHOOD
IN KOREAN AMERICAN LITERATURE FOR YOUTH

NINA HANEE JANG

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of English

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OTHERHOOD: TRACING CHILDHOOD
IN KOREAN AMERICAN LITERATURE FOR YOUTH

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무한히 감사합니다.

사랑합니다.

N.H.J.

CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
INTRODUCTION	1
The Korean Diaspora	7
Storytelling as Methodology	13
Chapter Layout	15
Audience	17
CHAPTER I: GROWING IN OTHERHOOD	19
Articulating <i>Otherhood</i>	31
Othered Bodies and Empowering Relationships	35
Conclusion	45
CHAPTER II: HOW TO BE FAT, QUEER, AND KOREAN	47
<i>Unbelonging</i> as a Way of Life	54
Embodying Multiple Homes	63
A New Way Home	65
Conclusion	78
CHAPTER III: HALMONI & ME	79
Identity, Tradition, and Counternarratives	86
Embracing Magic, Tiger, and Other Dangers	92
Conclusion	101

CHAPTER IV: LOVING COMMUNITY OF LEARNING: NOTES FROM A SEMESTER OF TEACHING TOWARD EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE	102
Planning a Community of Love	106
Forming, Nurturing, and Sustaining the Community	116
Where Love Grows, and Where Love Won't Reach	127
CONCLUSION: REWRITING THE OTHER	131
WORKS CITED	134

INTRODUCTION

At first, it was scarcity. Throughout my graduate career while I studied children's literature, I suffered from the lack of exposure to the stories that represented me—my own embodied realities, my childhood experiences as an Asian kid. Like a snake without proper heat and sunlight, I was getting weaker and weaker every day as I read and studied other children's stories—children who weren't Asian. The stories about those children were great stories. They each deserved their place in the world and I could see the need for their existence. Still, I was left wondering: *Where are the stories about Asian kids? Don't Asian authors write about children and childhood?* My rising consciousness about this scarcity led me to lose interest in pursuing my career as a scholar in children's literature. The scarcity made me become lacking in other things: Feelings. Nothing moved me much. I became withdrawn. Everything was white noise.

Of course, there were classes and seminars where I *did* get to read the stories about Asian children. It was the first thing I looked for when I got the syllabus: a reading about Asians written by an Asian author. When there *was* an inclusion, it usually was the only Asian text for the entire course. Those books included Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, George Takei, Justin Eisinger, and Steven Scott's *They Called Us Enemy*, Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* and *The Shadow Hero*. None of those courses, however, included a Korean author's work. With the abundance of amazing Korean authors out there, it's truly a shame that I didn't get to read a single primary or secondary text written by them in my children's literature courses during the entirety of my graduate career. As children's literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop writes, "Literature

transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (1). Although Bishop was mainly writing about children’s experiences, this statement also applies to other groups, such as adolescents and adults, especially those who study children’s literature. Without the literature that reflected my experiences of childhood, I couldn’t find the mirrors that provided me self-affirmation. Without those mirrors, I struggled to see Korean Americans being valued as a part of society in the U.S. This lack of self-affirmation in books also gave me even bigger concerns. I wondered: *How often do Korean American children find their mirrors in the books they read? How do they get by without the stories written about them?* The answer to the first question I found was grim. According to the infographic on diversity in children’s books in 2018 created by Professor of Library and Information Science Sarah Park Dahlen and illustrator David Huyck, only 7% of children’s books published in 2018 depicted Asian Pacific Islander/Asian Pacific American (API/APA) characters. I could only imagine the answer to the second question I had. And it didn’t look good.

And then there was the other issue. Whenever I *did* read a story about Asian children in those courses, I didn’t really get to learn about the theoretical works formulated by Asian and Asian American scholars that would ethically and effectively explain the realities of those children’s lives. The theoretical lenses we were asked to discuss and apply to the stories about Asian children were usually

written by White¹ scholars. Even though some parts of the White Feminism I read in my coursework helped explain some experiences of the oppressed, that scholarship still failed and inflicted much harm to BIWOC (Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color) by both centering White experiences and lacking a deep interrogation of how race plays an integral role in women's lives. In most White Feminists' works, race wasn't a fundamental element. When White Feminists *did* include an exploration of race, it was only a factor that deserved attention when they talked about BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) experiences. Often, for White Feminists, their own race wasn't a factor profound enough to investigate about themselves, although their reality is significantly affected by the privileges that their race affords. In *White Tears and Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color*, journalist Ruby Hamad summarizes the violence of White Feminism in poignantly illuminating words, saying that the "weaponization of White Womanhood continues to be

¹ I capitalize White as an indication of the racial category. Not doing so would ignore the way Whiteness functions in our society and reinforce Whiteness as the norm and standard. I also capitalize Whiteness in the same logic. Further, I also capitalize White Feminist/Feminism and White Womanhood so as not to confuse these concepts with generic meanings of the phrases. To explain this, I will borrow Rafia Zakaria's definition of a White Feminist when she says, "to be a white feminist you simply have to be a person who accepts the benefits conferred by white superemacy at the expense of people of color, while claiming to support gender equality and solidarity with 'all' women" (xvi). In a similar vein, White Womanhood is not simply the state of being a White woman, but it is the condition in which a White woman uses her racial privilege to dominate and control BIPOC.

the centerpiece of an arsenal used to maintain the status quo and punish anyone who dares challenge it” (17). I can attest that this statement rings true to me—both academically and personally. White Womanhood is certainly the status quo. If it weren’t, it wouldn’t be saturating the cultural discourse of women’s lives and invalidating BIWOC realities. If it weren’t, there wouldn’t be so many testimonials of BIWOC out there who have been bullied by White women. In other words, White Womanhood has been one of the central forces that oppress BIPOC for centuries. In *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*, Pakistani American journalist Rafia Zakaria asserts rightly that White women “wanted parity with white men at any cost, including by avidly taking on the domination of Black and Brown people. As white feminists have progressed within their societies, and began to occupy increasingly important positions, they’re constructing a feminism that uses the lives of Black and Brown people as arenas in which they can prove their credentials to white men” (79). Most White Feminists, in my experience, go only as far as advocating the *idea* of diversity and inclusion as an act of virtue signaling, but are resistant to accept the fact that they also *participate* in the oppression of BIPOC as a direct result of the unethical ideologies of White Feminism. If anyone has to step on others’ shoulders in order to stand tall and gain power, it is not true liberation. Activist and cultural critic Mikki Kendall states in *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that a Movement Forgot*: “There’s nothing feminist about having so many resources at your fingertips and choosing to be ignorant. Nothing empowering or enlightening in deciding that intent trumps impact. Especially when the consequences aren’t going to be experienced by you, but will instead be experienced by someone from a marginalized community” (6). I am also reminded of Audre Lorde’s powerful words when she says, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different

from my own. And I am not free as long as one of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you” (132-33). Sitting in the classrooms of the graduate courses where White Feminists incessantly talked about the oppression that they had to endure without acknowledging how they themselves oppress BIPOC, insisting how well they understood the mechanics of systemic racism and its harm, and claiming to identify themselves as “allies” to BIPOC, I stopped being withdrawn. I became *angry*.

While anger often carries negative connotations in many cultures, Lorde’s definition expands our knowledge on this human emotion by stating that “[a]nger is loaded with information and energy” (127) and “[f]ocused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (127). In *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, Professor of Women and Gender Studies Brittney Cooper validates Lorde’s points and reclaims anger when she writes that “it’s the disruptive girls, the loud, rowdy, attitudinal Black girls, and the defiant, quiet, insolent Black girls who expose every day exactly what this system is made of” (163). Further, in *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger*, activist and writer Soraya Chemaly articulates the point beautifully: “Anger is the expression of hope.... Your anger is a gift you give to yourself and the world that is yours. In anger, I have lived more fully, freely, intensely, sensitively, and politically. If ever there was a time not to silence yourself, to channel your anger into healthy places and choices, this is it” (296).

This dissertation is, then, a gift to myself and to the world. It is my attempt to harness my anger and tap into the information and energy that my anger offers me to make a change. During my Ph.D. study in children’s literature, I have avidly searched for texts that represent and explain the experiences of Asian children with a newly found energy and a sense of purpose. I thought, *If I’m*

feeling this scarcity, there will be plenty of other Asian scholars out there who feel a similar lack in their research. And if there is this noticeable absence in the discipline of children's literature, then it means that there are plenty of non-Asian scholars out there who will benefit from learning about Asian realities.

This is how I began this research, which I have titled, "*Otherhood: Tracing Childhood in Korean American Literature for Youth.*"²

I have several reasons why I focus specifically on *Korean American* literature for youth in this research. First, I want my research to embody depth. There are 48 countries across Asia, and it didn't seem ethical for me to select just a few Asian identities—and it would be impossible to include *all* Asian identities. Second, because I grew up in Korea, Korean culture is what I intimately understand from my own first-hand experiences. For this reason, I am more confident talking about Korean experiences than about all Asian experiences. Last, I want to investigate what it means to live as *Korean Americans*—as immigrants or descendants of immigrants—because diasporic experiences reveal much about our identities and the social, political, and geographical relations that we are involved in.

Therefore, in the next section, I will briefly introduce how the Korean diaspora has played out in interaction with United States history so that I can explain the geopolitical backdrop of my subject.

² I use the words "youth" and "children" in this dissertation to refer widely to anyone who isn't adult yet, and "literature for youth" to refer to both children's and YA literature.

The Korean Diaspora

Conventionally, the word “diaspora” has been used frequently in formulations such as “the Jewish diaspora”: the compulsory dislocation of Jews from Israel that extended over centuries. However, the definition of diaspora has been more widely used to indicate a mass migration of diverse cultural groups. According to Evelyn Hu-DeHart in the entry for “Diaspora” within *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, “Diasporas are most often defined in terms of race (black), ethnicity (Jewish, Chinese, Lebanese, Vietnamese), nation (Japanese, Indian, Cuban, Mexican), and also religion (Hindu, Muslim, Tibetan Buddhist), region (South Asian, Caribbean), and other categories” (50). Further, Hu-DeHart notes the importance of the context given to each diaspora. “Because so many of the world’s human experiences now qualify as diaspora, it is imperative that diasporas be studied respectively and in their distinct and particular historical contexts in order for this common experience to be appreciated comparatively” (50). And these historical contexts across Asian communities, of course, differ greatly because “Asian Americans have differed not only in their country of origin, but also in their immigration and generational status, class position, religion, and gender. These differences have resulted in distinct experiences and histories,” as Erika Lee, a Chinese American historian, asserts (3). This specific historical and political context for the Korean diaspora is important because it is the sociopolitical backdrop of a mass migration that differentiates one diaspora from another.

Korean people have been immigrating to the United States since as early as the late 1800s. According to Professor of Ethnic Studies Edward T. Chang and Researcher at the Young Oak Kim Center for Korean American Studies Carol K. Park, a small number of ginseng merchants from Korea

arrived in San Francisco, California, in the late 1800s, but it wasn't until January 13 in the year of 1903 that a larger number of Koreans immigrated to the American land as laborers at Hawaiian sugar plantations (ii).³ These immigrant workers from Korea earned only about 50 cents a day, which had the same purchasing power as \$7.85 in the current year of 2023 ("Value of 50 cents in 1920"). While being abused as significantly underpaid sugar plantation laborers, these Korean immigrants helped build the U.S. and contributed to its economic success that the imperialist country earned unethically, exploiting not only Koreans but also other diasporic communities.

The Korean diaspora in the next era was largely induced by the Japanese occupation of Korea and the instability of the Korean government. Chang and Park explain that the early generation of Korean immigrants worked to contribute to the liberation of their homeland: "Koreans living in the United States considered themselves as nationals and organized meetings and rallies for the freedom of their homeland. They also gathered funds and published newspapers" (vii). Although these early Korean immigrants were living in a U.S. territory, they mostly identified themselves as Korean nationals since they strove to help their home country by working from a distance.

Eventually, Korea gained independence from Japan in 1945 but the peace was short-lived. As a result of the power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union that started the Cold War, Korea was divided into South Korea and North Korea, and the two battled against each other in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953 until they came to a "standstill." The Korean War has never ended to

³ Hawaii became a U.S. territory in 1900 and did not become a state until 1959, but the sugar plantations were largely owned by U.S. corporations.

this day, which is a direct result of the Cold War. Soon after the war, the Korean diaspora exacerbated dramatically. Chang and Park explain,

During the 1970s, a high number of Koreans moved to the United States. Many of these new urban immigrants were brought over by Korean war brides; the wives of American soldiers who fought in the Korean War. The so[-]called “G.I. Brides” sponsored their family members to come to the United States under the new provisions of the 1965 Immigration Act. By 1980, the Korean American population had reached 354,953. By 1990, that number would more than double to 798,849. (x)

Because U.S. troops have occupied South Korea since the end of World War II, many American soldiers have taken Korean women as their wives. According to Professor of History Ji-Yeon Yuh, “military brides are responsible (directly and indirectly) for bringing forty to fifty percent of all Korean immigrants since 1965” (278) and “some 90,000 Korean women immigrated to America as wives of U.S. soldiers” (279). Here, I want to point out the vulnerable positionalities of these women when they married American men. Ever since U.S. troops occupied the land, sexual assaults on Korean women perpetrated by American soldiers have been common—Growing up in Korea, I was often taught to avoid American soldiers for this perceived danger by adults—and Professor Ch’oe Kil-song explains that “U.S. Army’s comfort women⁴ spread throughout the country and became part of the official policy of both the United States and South Korea” (Ch’oe).

⁴ Euphemism for sexual slaves, originally “慰安婦” (in Korean: “위안부”) in Japanese language coined by the Imperial Japanese Army.

When the “G.I. Brides” immigrated to the U.S. and sponsored their family members after the 1965 Immigration Act, U.S. Americans inflicted many types of gender, race, and class-based abuse on Korean women. Many of the mixed-race children fathered by American soldiers were also left behind, and Yuh states that transnational adoption is “the other immediate category of migration traceable to the Korean War” (279). This is an important historical issue that I want my readers to understand because, in the colonialist historical accounts of Asian immigration in the U.S., the immigration stories are presented as if the immigrants were simply “free” individuals who found a new home through marriage or sought better economic opportunities. However, reality is much more complicated and compels us to look at history more closely so that we can understand the larger context. Yuh’s introduction to the term *refugee migration* is particularly useful in expanding our understanding on Korean American immigration because “the Korean War created an expanded refugee migration that led Koreans to Europe, Latin America, and the United States in search of security” (280-81). She further explains:

This refuge migration is hidden in other categories, such as the marriage migration of military brides and the labor and professional migration of miners, doctors, and nurses. Although ostensibly migrants or immigrants rather than refugees fleeing from an immediate danger, their life narratives demonstrate that flight from war and its consequences is a crucial factor in their migration.... Often, the definition of refugee—whether by the UN, aid workers, or scholars—is tied to the equally politicized definition of human rights: refugees are fleeing situations where their human rights are being violated or are in immediate danger of being violated.

Economics—like famine—generally isn't considered enough unless famine is immediately life-threatening. Refugee migrants, on the other hand, are fleeing perceived danger and seeking peace of mind.... [They] are motivated by a deep psychological need to leave behind chaos, and insecurity, and trauma, and they seek out emotional/mental peace and a stable environment that doesn't feel like it's always threatening to explode. (281).

Yuh's argument works to subvert the common perception on Asian American immigration by redefining and reclaiming the concept of *refugee* and uncovering the hidden aspects of history. I would add that not only capitalist economies but also other systems of oppression endanger minoritized individuals, so prejudices such as homophobia and ablism also contribute to refugee migration. It is also important to note that even when Korean immigrants arrived in the U.S., they struggled to become a part of society as a direct result of racist government policies, institutions, and acts of discrimination.

The Korean diaspora continues to this day as the United States still occupies South Korea physically with military troops and bases on Korean lands, ostensibly in the name of protecting South Koreans against communism. Psychologically, the cultural imperialism of American ideologies pervades the minds of many South Koreans. For example, transnational adoption from South Korea is also an integral part of the Korean diaspora. Further, in the past few decades, an increasing numbers of ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers from the U.S. have arrived in South Korea due to the country's high demand for private education in English, and many of the teachers married Koreans and immigrated back to the U.S. as a married couple. This has contributed to recent Korean

immigration to the U.S. as well. As Don Mee Choi describes in the title of her National Book Award-winning hybrid poetry collection published in 2020, South Korea is, indeed, *DMZ Colony*, that is, one of the United States' neo-colonies under the insidious pressure of the capitalist empire.

Diasporic memories and experiences are an important element of Korean American identity. Moreover, children and adolescents have always been members of this diaspora. Naturally, Korean American literature for youth often explores the subject of immigration, including the narratives that I examine in this dissertation: *The Fold* by An Na, *I'll Be the One* by Lyla Lee, and *When You Trap a Tiger* by Tae Keller, and immigration is an important element that influences the children's relationship to power. According to Professor of Children's Literature Roberta Seelinger Trites, narratives about adolescents "depict adolescents disturbing and being disturbed by the institutions that construct their universe" (*Disturbing the Universe*, xiv) and as they grow, they "must learn their place in the power structure" (*Disturbing the Universe*, x). Although Trites analyzes how social institutions such as authority, sex, and death influence adolescents' relationship to power (or the lack thereof) as they mature into adults, she doesn't examine fully how systems of oppression that pertain specifically to adolescents of color such as racial oppression or discrimination against immigrants act as fundamental institutions that interact with their power. In her 2017 work *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*, though, Trites examines the subject of race at length discussing Kimberlé Crenshaw's term "intersectionality" and Michael Hames-García's contending term "multiplicity." However, her examination of race doesn't extend much further, and race is only a major factor when it comes to the narratives about youths of color. Another missing

element in her examination of race in adolescent literature is the exploration of how racial oppression plays out uniquely across diverse communities of color (for example, there's no research being done about Asian American youths in the book.). My other concern is the ways in which she frames material feminism for her overall research in the book. While she adheres to the fact that "most aspects of human life are mediated by language and discourse," Trites attributes material feminists for arguing that bodies are not "solely constructed by discourse" and they "insist that embodiment be considered in terms of both the material *and* the discursive" (*Twenty-First-Century Feminisms*, xvi-xxii, italics in the original). What is disregarded in this framing is the ways in which people of color have always argued for their material reality being in a constant interplay with the discursive construction of who we are even before the arrival of material feminism. Of course, White Feminists have contributed to the critical attention paid to embodiment in our culture, but lacking a deep interrogation of race in the discussion of corporeal reality has always been the problem of White Feminism.

For a Korean American child, learning their place in the power structure informed by the growing consciousness of their identity is especially crucial for them to survive and empower themselves as an Other. In this dissertation, I aim to capture just that: how fictional Korean American children develop their identities and use that ontological awareness to empower themselves.

Storytelling as Methodology

In this section, I want to discuss storytelling as the central methodology of my research. Building a creative dissertation, I open each chapter by writing about my own lived experiences in my

youth.⁵ This is my conscious and intentional effort as a creative writer and a scholar, and I do so in order to challenge our cultural notions about what does and doesn't count as a legitimate and profound source of knowledge. Autoethnography has been widely used in various academic disciplines. However, I consider autoethnographic research to be especially meaningful in research that examines the realities of the Other. Many scholars I admire, such as Sara Ahmed, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cathy Park Hong, bell hooks, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Thomas King, María Lugones, and George Yancy, look to their own lived experiences of being an Other as valid and valuable testimonials when they develop their theoretical frameworks, linking the personal to the political. Further, since all children are Othered individuals, scholars of children's literature have utilized autoethnography as a research tool to explain childhood and children. Library and Information Studies Professor Margaret Mackey's work in *One Child Reading: My Auto-Bibliography* is a good example. Mackey comments that exploring the texts that she read as a child "reverberate[s] for me in telling ways, with all the biases and rhetorical tricks of any telling. My re-exploration of these materials offers potential to develop a deeper understanding of the complex internal world of reading" (7). In the introduction to *A Narrative Compass: Stories that Guide Women's Lives*, the editors Betsy Hearne and Roberta Seelinger Trites also share a view that acknowledges the validity and usefulness of autoethnographic research: "When scholars understand the relationship between text and context, between the subject they study and their own lives, they can draw on their internalized knowledge of storytelling to help analyze what they study" (xiv). Thus, I explore my own personal experiences in my youth to develop scholarly frameworks that directly connect my stories to the scopes of my research in each chapter. Of course, as

⁵ Some names and identifying details in my personal accounts have been changed.

children's literature theorist Maria Nikolajeva suggests, our memory is "subjective, incoherent, fragmentary, disjunctive, random, and imprecise" (146). However, what I value in storytelling as a methodology is what those faulty memories afford the writer to explore and reflect on, and the unique perspective storytelling provides for academic readers. As scholars of life writing Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson state, "Any utterance in an autobiographical text, even if inaccurate or distorted, is a characterization of its writer" (15). Further, autoethnographic research pushes the audience to take a more active role as participants of thought-making. Smith and Watson argue, "life writing requires an audience to both confirm the writer's existence in time and mark his or her [or their] specificity, distinctiveness, and location" (16). With that being said, I invite my audience to view my autoethnographic writing as the characterization of myself as a writer and a scholar instead of as a documentation of facts, and to relate to or consider my stories with their own childhood experiences.

Chapter Layout

In chapter 1, I introduce my concept of *Otherhood*. Utilizing the works of scholars who have articulated what it means to be Othered as children under systems of oppression, I examine the childhood experiences of Korean Americans and provide a close reading of *The Fold* as a literary example. My goal in this chapter is to provide an epistemological landscape of Korean American youth and to challenge the normalized cultural notions of childhood.

In chapter 2, I explore how fatness and queerness operate uniquely in Korean American culture in order to further complicate the understanding of the identities of Korean American youth. While doing so, I theorize the concept of *unbelonging* as a survival tactic of an Other and utilize *I'll Be*

the One as an example that illustrates the experience of a Korean American youth who identifies as fat and queer. Many scholars' works in Queer Theory, Fat Studies, and Children's Literature Studies contribute to my scholarship in this chapter. What I aim to achieve in this chapter is to resist the practice of universalizing the experiences of being Othered (such as being fat and queer) and to offer a more discrete framework with which to examine the reality of Korean American youths.

In chapter 3, I focus on Creative Writing Studies in order to examine how Asian American writers construct their storytelling. I argue that heritage is an integral part of craft for the writers of Othered communities and a fundamental ingredient for us to write our stories *against* master narratives. In this chapter, I rely on the Asian scholars' works that strive to decolonize our understandings of what it means to create and challenge the normalization of Western narrative structure. As a literary example, I use *When You Trap a Tiger* to showcase the unique ways that a Korean American writer constructs her storytelling and presents a poignant *counterstory*.

In chapter 4, I examine the ways in which my understanding of diverse children's and YA narratives dealing with social justice issues have mediated my teaching. I reflect on my teaching internship in Fall 2021 when I taught ENG 125: Literary Narratives. While reflecting, I theorize *love* as the pedagogical framework (stemming from the innovative works of bell hooks) to build a safer and more equitable classroom environment where students can learn about social justice issues and work toward creating a change in our culture.

In the conclusion, I present my final thoughts, feelings, and sensations that I hope to share with my readers, as well as some visions for the past, present, and future.

Audience

Finally, in closing my introduction, I want to share my thoughts on the implied audience for this dissertation. Of course, since this is a Ph.D. dissertation, my primary audience is my dissertation committee members, including the chair, Roberta Seelinger Trites, and committee members Ricardo Cortez Cruz and Sarah Park Dahlen. However, I want to stress here that my implied audience outside my dissertation committee is Korean American and Asian American scholars who are interested in the subject of childhood and/or literature for youth. To me, intentionally positioning my implied target audience is a choice of ethics as a writer. I am not writing for the so-called universal audience of scholars. As writer Janelle Adsit and social justice educator Renee M. Byrd state,

This idea of “universal audience” risks a homogenizing effect that ignores or obfuscates the differences in our identities and the power relations that structure the world. Moreover, the idea of a universalized audience is likely to reinforce a white-centered approach to literature, one that naturalizes as “universal” a specifically white (and heteronormative, upper or middle class, etc.) perspective.... A supposedly “generic” reader may be implicitly raced—and gendered, classed, etc.—even as these identity categories are neglected or covered over by the idea of a “universal audience.” (21-22)

Because of this, if you are not my implied reader, you may find yourself not recognizing or comfortable with certain words, phrases, or cultural phenomena in this dissertation that would be more familiar to my intended audience who have lived experiences as Korean Americans and Asian Americans. I therefore do not commit to providing in-depth commentaries about those concepts for

the “generic audience” because I wish to avoid reinforcing a White-centered approach to scholarly writing. If you are not my implied audience, I believe that you will still benefit from the research and theories made available in this dissertation. However, I warmly invite you to also meet me halfway. As readers, we all have to do our own work of research in order to fill in our own epistemological gaps—especially when we learn about other minoritized communities. We all have cultural responsibilities based on our social positionalities and privileges. As Adsit and Byrd argue, “As readers ... [w]e should read with the cultural humility that acknowledges difference and seeks to learn what is offered, without demanding a certain set of things from the text” (23). As a reader of many different cultures myself I wholeheartedly endorse this statement.

If you are a Korean American and/or Asian American person, this work is for you. You are my inspiration that, perhaps without your even knowing it, you have contributed to my work, not only as audiences but also as participants. I hope you find here what you were looking for. It is for us I write.

CHAPTER I: GROWING IN OTHERHOOD

I know now that once I longed to be white.

How many more ways? you ask,

Haven't I told you enough?

—Nellie Wong

In March of 2004 in South Korea, I was twelve. Korean March is brutally cold, especially in the mornings and at night. As I was getting ready for my first day of middle school at 7:30 in the morning, I felt shame crawling upon my legs. I was putting on pantyhose for the first time in my life. Starting middle school meant that I had to wear a school uniform and pantyhose were a part of it—even if it was thirty degrees Fahrenheit outside.

The silky texture of this unfamiliar, femininity-coded clothing was so fragile that the clumsy movements of my child's hands and unruly fingernails pierced a hole as I pulled it up to my thighs. I glimpsed at the hole, ignored it, and pulled it higher. But as soon as I pulled the pantyhose up to my waist, the hole stretched into a long line and my thigh was now covered by a giant hole with a long tail. It felt as if the shape of the hole was a screeching cry that I could audibly perceive. It felt like a protest—a feminine object's sense of horror at my new, pitiful gender performance. My mind was filled with equally loud frustration and anger as I finally took the pantyhose off and walked to my dresser to grab a new pair. My mother had told me to be careful with them. But I didn't want to be

careful. This object felt like confinement to my body. Putting on the pantyhose and revealing my legs in this freezing weather felt utterly ridiculous, and more important, shameful. It felt like the pantyhose were wearing me, instead of me wearing them.

I finally managed to put on a new pair without making another hole and finished dressing myself in a striped dress shirt, a plum-colored plaid skirt and vest, and a blazer with the school's logo on its pocket. Even though I was fully dressed and ready for school, I was hesitant to leave my family's apartment. Up until that age, I had refused to wear anything that I perceived to be feminine looking. My go-to outfits had always been gym clothes, t-shirts, jeans, and overalls. I was constantly afraid of looking girly and *feeling* girly. My parents thought it was a phase that I would grow out of.

When I realized I could no longer bide my time, I headed outside. Feeling the icy breeze pinching all over my body on my walk to school, I saw boys of my age on their way to school too. They were heading toward the boys' middle school next to the girls' middle school that I was supposed to attend. I knew about the upcoming separation based on the gender binary, but it really hit me then that I could no longer share classrooms with boys. We weren't supposed to be too close. The familiar Korean expression, “남녀칠세 부동석,” roughly translated as “*No girls and boys sitting together after the age of seven,*” ran past me. Suddenly, I felt my world closing in on me. A few months before, I was playing with all kinds of kids—girls, boys, and the kids like me who belonged somewhere in between those two groups. In many ways, I often found myself feeling more authentic when I was around and amongst boys. One of my close “girlfriends,” Jiyeon, and I used to collect and play with BB guns and go to Taekwondo lessons together every evening after school. We hated when our moms tried to give

us pigtails or anything that made us look even remotely girly. We knew this well about each other as we bonded. Sometimes I wonder if Jiyeon ever “grew out” of it all. From a very young age, I had a sense that I was *different* although I didn’t know that particular difference was called *queerness* until I was much older.

Feeling trapped in that feminine outfit on that cold morning, I wanted to run away. But my body was confined by the unfamiliar textures and shapes of my new clothing. I didn’t dare move off track. I didn’t even know where to run off to. Instead, I started walking to my new school. What I didn’t realize then was that I was also walking farther away from myself. On that first day of middle school, I could not imagine the trajectory ahead of me in the upcoming years at school, of how powerless I’d grow each passing day in so many ways I could not have imagined before.

As I embarked on the new era of my compulsory gender performance, I started feeling uglier every day whenever I looked into the mirror. In school, I found myself talking enviously with other girls about who in our class had the palest skin or the biggest eyes with a fold in their eyelids. I realized I had neither of them. I found myself in the girls’ restroom during recess, whitening my face with Johnson & Johnson’s baby powder and placing double-eyelid cellophane tapes on my eyelids, so that my monolids would fold artificially. I put on “circle-lenses,” the contact lenses that make the iris look enlarged, bigger, and lighter in color, as most of my classmates did. My classmates and I shared the same inferiority complex about Whiteness, even though we didn’t call it that. We called it “beauty.” And we had very clear ideas about what that meant. We participated in this cosmetic ritual together every single day, hiding in the restrooms where our shame brewed slowly. What we were doing was

attempting to look more attractive. And to look more attractive, we needed to look less who we were, less Asian, and instead, *White*.

In the 2019 documentary, *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*, Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison reminisces about the time when she was writing *The Bluest Eyes*, a book that interrogates a child's internalized racism. Morrison explains, "I had a major, major question at the time. 'How does a child learn self-loathing? Where does it come from? Who enables it? How is it infectious? And what might be the consequences?'" (*Toni Morrison*, 14:19). While ruminating on Morrison's poignant questions, I wondered: How do we locate the source of a child's self-loathing? Who's being held accountable for this treacherous shame that children experience at the mere age of twelve? What happens to a child's process of maturation in which self-loathing and shame are powerfully destructive elements of identity formation? Can a child salvage their power despite it all?

By the time I graduated from middle school, it felt as if almost 80 percent of my class had received Blepharoplasty, a surgery that creates artificial double-folds on monolids. The stories of how costly and physically painful this surgery was circulated in classrooms, as did my peers' persistent will to go through the surgery, nonetheless. When I think about my childhood memories, I constantly find myself thinking about our bodies— how they were violated, by whom, when, and why. Shame followed our bodies everywhere we went.

In *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Cathy Park Hong claims that "the flipside of innocence is *shame*" (75, emphasis mine). Hong recounts the sense of shame she carried in her childhood while growing up as a second-generation Korean American in the United States, receiving

racial slurs at school and witnessing White people infantilizing her parents in front of their daughter. If shame is the flipside of innocence—as Hong suggests—it seems that innocence in childhood is reserved more for particular bodies than others, while shame is predicated on a different set of other bodies. But *whose bodies?*

In Western cultures, the alignment of innocence and childhood is a conceptualization of the modern era that was popularized during the Industrial Revolution. With the arrival of industrialized life that accelerated the promotion of capitalist ideals, and as the Industrial Revolution radically changed living conditions for people in the nineteenth century, childhood was fetishized as a time of innocence that harkened back to the pre-industrial world, whether that accurately described children's lives in a previous era or not. The alignment of innocence and childhood is, in fact, nostalgia—as in, related to “feelings of loss and longing, memory and remembrance, pain and sadness” (136), according to Boel Westin—that looks *back* at a time in the past with rose-tinted glasses rather than looking *at* the present, lived faces of childhood. In order to look back at childhood, one must no longer be a child. And this nostalgic, romantic vision of childhood is something that still persists in our culture today. It is not the children who romanticize their time; it is the adults who look back and define this period without real consideration for the people (children) who are currently experiencing this specific time of their lives. And because of this unethical envisioning by adults, the alignment of innocence and childhood is deeply troubling.

Discussing the ways in which European colonizers viewed Arabs and Asians as “Orientals” who “are not capable of describing or analyzing themselves” and Orientalism as being “inherently and

inevitably a study of what theorists often call *the other*—of that which is opposite to the person doing the talking or thinking or studying” (29), children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman uses the same analogy to describe the ways in which adults view children. He argues that “[i]t’s fairly obvious that our descriptions of childhood similarly purport to see and speak for children, and that we believe them to be similarly incapable of speaking for themselves” (29). Further, Nodelman looks to Edward W. Said’s work in *Orientalism* and notes, “Said’s words force us to face the uncomfortable conclusion that our attempting to speak for and about children in these ways will always confirm their difference from, and presumably, inferiority to, ourselves as thinkers and speakers” (29). Other children’s literature scholars, such as Jacqueline Rose, echo this troubling theoretical approach to children’s literature and those studies of children’s literature in which adults have defined childhood experiences. Rose states:

Children’s fiction is impossible.... Children’s fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. To say that the child is inside the book—children’s books are after all as often as not *about* children—is to fall straight into a trap. It is to confuse the adult’s intention to get at the child with the child it portrays. If children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp. There is, in one sense, no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between

writer and addressee. Children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child *in*. (1-2, italics in the original)

While both Nodelman and Rose make sound arguments about the ideological and unethical nature of children's literature, they ignore two major points. First, children's fiction is not the only body of literature that sets up its subject as an outsider, resting openly on the difference (not only the difference but also the power imbalance, I would add) between the writer and the addressee. In fact, most White authors' writings about BIPOC characters have historically set up BIPOC as outsiders, aiming unashamedly to take us *in* with racist and colonialist agendas. Indeed, BIPOC are not inside the book in that case. What's inside is the White people's intention to get at the BIPOC with the BIPOC it portrays. In her essay, Philosopher Linda Alcoff critiques the act of speaking for others:

The recognition that there is a problem experience speaking for others has arisen from two sources. First, ... a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their *social* location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech....The unspoken premise here is simply that a speaker's location is epistemically salient....The second source involves a recognition that, not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. In particular, the practice of privileged person speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for. (6-7)

The power imbalance between the speaker and the addressee thus inflicts epistemic violence, especially when the speaker does not acknowledge their own privileges that keep them from recognizing the aspects of realities that the addressee experiences in their day-to-day life. Second, both Nodelman and Rose ignore the fact that children are not a singular, monolithic subject. The problem of adults speaking for children gets even more complexly dogmatic and dangerous when an adult in the position of social power and privilege speaks for a child from a marginalized community. Further, adults are not the only group that speaks for the children as if they are incapable of thinking and speaking for themselves. Outside of books, children in more socially privileged positions also speak for the children with less privilege; thus privileged children are also agents that reinforce the oppression of the Othered children. This phenomenon also influences the discourses in children's literature and the study of children's literature.

In the introductory course for children's literature that I teach, I ask my students about the concept of innocence. One of the very memorable answers I've received was "Nobody is innocent, when you really think about it." It's true. Nobody is completely innocent. For one, I certainly wasn't innocent in my own childhood. Shame was written all over it, and I was always shaken by the world around me where power was unequally distributed among communities and individuals. Even more troubling about this misalignment is not only the inaccuracy of what childhood truly is, but also the acute imbalance of privilege in childhoods that we erase when we romanticize childhood. I believe that some childhoods *get to* be more innocent than some. But I ask again: *which childhoods?*

The concept of innocence has a deep connection to privilege. Children with more sociopolitical privileges—such as being White, male, cis-gendered, heterosexual, abled-bodied, neurotypical, and middle to upper class—are relatively more protected from the experiences and knowledge of the societal harms that less privileged children directly encounter in their everyday lives.⁶ While my student’s wise words about innocence were indeed accurate, there is a variation in the *states* of being innocent, just as with privilege. Some people are born with more privilege than others. Some children are kept more innocent than other children. Just as Diane J. Goodman argues that privilege

⁶ The markers of identity I listed here are not separate components but in constant interactions with each other, and they should be considered in connection with each other in the discourse of identity. To resist the “single-axis framework” that considers only one identity component at the expense of another, civil rights advocate and a scholar of Critical Race Theory Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” and challenged the ways Black women’s experiences are erased in both feminist theory and antiracist politics (140). While I acknowledge that Crenshaw’s term expands the ways in which we understand identity politics, I don’t actively utilize the term in my research here because the term’s original goal and purpose was to make Black women’s experiences more visible in legal settings, not to account for *all* experiences of identity and thus erase the individual nuances of racialized, gendered, and otherwise Othered experiences. Intersectionality has been overused and oversimplified in the popular feminist discourse, and as Brittany Cooper notes, recent scholars have recognized intersectionality’s limitation to “fully account for all the exigencies of identity in the face of multiple and proliferating categories of social identity” (“Intersectionality,” 3).

and oppression are the two sides of the same coin (1), the reason some children are less innocent is a direct consequence of the shame from social injustices that some children experience too frequently in their childhoods. Privilege and oppression operate together to establish domination and control over individuals, while innocence and shame work together to keep certain childhoods safer and more comfortable, while others are precarious and unstable. The notion of an innocent childhood is reserved for more privileged children, although, as a culture, we often erase this truth by ignoring the diverse identities of children in society. The singularity of nostalgia for childhood is harmful especially for children who are Othered by systems of oppression because the master narrative of childhood doesn't accurately represent and address their realities.

The societal shame I experienced on that first day of middle school was an encapsulated emotion that deeply related to my sense of agency shifting in the process of maturation. In many cultures, the notion of growing up has been associated with a child's newly attained agency and increased sociopolitical power as an individual in society. This idea holds some truth, since childhood itself is a form of disempowerment. As Aurora Levins Morales writes in "The Politics of Childhood," we as children "even with loving parents with good parenting skills" experience "arbitrary decisions, control over our bodily functions, involuntary confinement, and whether at home, at school or in other settings, disrespect, patronization, punishment, and ridicule" (104). Trites appears to validate Morales' claim when she states, "childhood and adolescence are one aspect of identity politics that involves subjects who have less political and economic power than the adults who define laws and social norms" (*Twenty-First-Century* 32). In other words, childhood is a political condition that entails

power relations of adults' dominance and the subjugation of children. And children do "pass through" this political condition if they survive their childhood and then theoretically gain access to power as adults. However, childhood is not the *only* form of disempowerment that children experience in their everyday lives. Other than this age-based subjugation, many systems of oppression keep children from simplistic trajectories of maturation and gaining agency, and the limited lens through which we see childhood as the time when children gain power increasingly as they grow fails to explain the intricate textures of many childhoods in which the increased sense of being Othered is an important phenomenon. The Othered child does not *escape* disempowerment as a young individual in any society as they grow up, but their disempowerment *intensifies* precisely because they mature into Othered bodies. For Othered bodies, childhood is especially *dynamic* because the child's social position and sense of power are constantly shifting with time while also (in)forming their identity. This cultural failure to perceive Othered childhood experiences has sparked my research on what I call "*Otherhood*," that is, the childhood in which the experiences of being Othered are fundamental to a young person's evolving identity formation and sense of power.

In this project, I aim to trace the textures and shapes of such childhoods, particularly those in Korean American literature for youth. In the U.S. culture where I'm studying literature for youth, not only Korean American childhoods, but also the bigger frame of Asian American childhoods have still not been represented well enough in the mainstream media, nor have they been researched thoroughly by many children's literature scholars. In the 2017 article, "A Step from Heaven: On Being a Woman of Color in Children's Literature Studies," Dahlen explains that she wasn't able to see herself in youth

literature while growing up, and furthermore, her stories as an Asian American “had been rendered invisible in the classroom and on library shelves” (82). This is a direct result of how mainstream White culture treats minority communities with exclusion and erasure. The fact that I’m having a hard time finding a full-volume critical study on Asian American children’s literature as I’m conducting this research supports my statement.⁷ Thus, this dissertation is coming directly from my heart and my embodiment. It is my attempt to speak to my community and *with* my community, while I put in intentional effort to making sense of our childhood experiences. I hope my work will resonate with many underserved Korean/Korean American audiences.

Being Othered is a significant part of our experience in the process of maturation. I plan to make sense of that reality through my critical analyses. Learning the source of our Otherings—in other words, the systems of oppression—is an important step in the work of decolonization, whether it’s in our everyday lives or in literary criticism. Morrison argues, “Because there are such major benefits in creating and sustaining an Other, it is important to 1) identify the benefits and 2) discover what may be the social/political results of repudiating those results” (19). “However, I don’t plan to just stop there—at naming and pointing at the violence—I will also explore the ways in which Korean/Korean

⁷ Except for Rocío G. Davis’ *Begin Here: Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood*, which examines memoirs of childhood, her co-edited special issue of *Lion and Unicorn* on Asian American youth lit, and Ymitri Mathison’s *Growing Up Asian American in Young Adult Fiction*, there isn’t yet a book-length survey on this topic. There are, though, many theses and dissertations written on the subject.

American children with diasporic heritages find ways to reclaim and reimagine their power by taking ownership of their identities via innovative narrative forms and the languages that accompany them.

Of course, since I am not a child anymore, my work inherently embodies epistemic gaps because of the difference in social positionalities. However, childhood is a *temporality* as much as a positionality. I, too, was once a child. In a way, I'm not talking about the reality of a social subject completely different from my own. I'm talking about the reality of my past-self. To put it in another way, this work is an ode to my own childhood memories and constitutes my effort to develop a theoretical framework from my own first-hand experience as an Othered child.

Articulating *Otherhood*

As I embark on the study of *Otherhood* I want to make it clear that many writers and scholars from other marginalized communities have already testified about the existence of *Otherhood* that do not fit the dominant cultural model of innocence in childhood.⁸ For instance, in the preface to her groundbreaking book on feminism, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins recounts her childhood as a Black person by stating: "My world

⁸ The concept of the Other as the counterpart of the Self is believed to be introduced by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in the eighteenth century and was advanced initially by later philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. None of these White, French theorists, however, carefully interrogated the ways in which race plays a part in the phenomenology of the Other, although the French colonial empire enslaved people from Africa as early as the sixteenth century.

grew larger, but I felt I was growing smaller” (vii). As many recent youth literature authors, such as Jason Reynolds, Angie Thomas, and Jacqueline Woodson have written about Black childhoods, Black children are Othered by White supremacy and structural racism while they are growing up. This Othering too often manifests itself in such forms as voter suppression, police brutality, and the school-to-prison pipeline, not to mention the ways Black children are criminalized and perceived as adults while seeing their parents constantly infantilized. Ta-Nehisi Coates makes an emotionally evocative testimony of this reality in his book *Between the World and Me*, written as a letter to his teenage son in the tradition similar to James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, which was written as a letter to his nephew. To his son, Coates says, “what matters is our condition, what matters is the system that makes your body breakable” (18). Warning his son of the violent White supremacist system that jeopardizes his childhood, Coates concludes, “The world has no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls” (25). Echoing Coates’ statement on Black childhood, Robin Bernstein also writes that Black children were historically “defined out of childhood” (20). Many Black authors and scholars have recognized the inequitable ways in which we have misconceptualized and misrepresented political tension between innocence and childhood.

While racialization is one fundamental element that shapes the experience of being Othered in the process of maturation, the binary gender system and heteronormativity also have significant influences on a child’s sense of self. Kathryn Bond Stockton describes queer childhood as “growing sideways” in *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, which she opposes to the common notion of growing “up” because queer youth do not fit the model of the linear growth that

leads to heteronormative marriage and child-rearing. For many queer children, growing up doesn't necessarily lead to finding a partner with whom to reproduce and raise a family. Queer children do not always see themselves fitting in to these normative social structures and expectations, so their refusal to the conventional social order makes them grow "sideways," as Stockton describes it, suggesting the marginalization and Otherness they embody during the process. In a similar vein, Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* argues that the child is conceptualized as the marker of innocence and represents the possibility of the future through reproduction, while the queer child is recognized as the embodiment of an antisocial, narcissistic, and future-negating death drive. However, Edelman further theorizes the ways in which queerness can and should be embraced as a powerful resistance to social and political norms. What these two Queer Theory scholars are highlighting are the ways in which queer children have been defined *out* of the normative childhoods dictated by the dominant culture's heteronormativity and binary gender system.

Coming back to my focus on Korean/Korean American children, I want to discuss, finally, how Cathy Park Hong explains her own childhood as a Korean American child in terms of "looking sideways," echoing Stockton's notion of "growing sideways." Hong claims that her childhood was "tainted with the sicklier haze of envy, an envy that ate at me when I stayed for dinner with my white friend's family or watched the parade of commercials and TV shows that made it clear what a child should look like and what kind of family they should grow up in" (68). Hong's thoughts about her childhood envy, specifically her envy of Whiteness, which is predicated on her social status of being the model minority, ricochet me back to my own childhood-memory of wanting to embody Whiteness.

Negating my skin color, my facial features, and my Korean accent and cultural values, my White envy was self-destructive and always entailed internalized racism.⁹ Having spent my childhood in South Korea, I didn't fully understand the racialization of Asian bodies when I first moved to the U.S. Of course, the racialization and racism from the colonial, White supremacist system existed in my childhood in South Korea, and I had awareness of my racial inferiority complex, which is so common in Korean culture in the modern era. However, when I came to the U.S., I could locate where exactly I was “looking sideways” to, as I found myself being surrounded by the embodiments of the colonizer—the White bodies. I started to make sense of what really happened to my interiority, which social system initiated the destruction, and how envy and shame spawned and grew in my childhood.

At the core of these marginalized childhoods, for me and for many adults, are memories of being Othered. The grains of these memories are uniquely different in each community, but they do share a commonality: that these experiences are *collective* rather than *individual* experiences within and sometimes across cultural communities. *Otherhood* is thus a political experience that children go through during their process of maturation, yet these experiences are underrepresented and

⁹ The phrase “model minority” is derived from “the model minority myth,” which “has been used to explain the assumed success of Asian Americans by essentializing this heterogeneous group of people as hardworking, docile, self-sufficient, and family oriented,” according to Shi-Wen Sue and Sin Wen Lau (292). It is the invention of White supremacy, that is, a narrative used to minimize how racism works to oppress BIPOC and force each non-White groups to compete against each other instead of recognizing White supremacy as the cause of inequity.

underanalyzed because of both the domination of master narratives that leave minoritized children in the shadows and the systems of oppression that fuel and facilitate these Otherings. In “Asian American Children’s Literature,” Dahlen observes, “Many contemporary Asian Americans write their largely autobiographical stories because they want the next generation to see themselves reflected in the books they read—a privilege unavailable to the writers during their youth” (2). Often, Asian American authors’ motivation for writing about *Otherhood* stems from their acute awareness of the lack of representation on their childhood experiences. And this, what I would describe as the “narrative injustice,” reinforces the problem of marginalization of social entities, in turn hindering disenfranchised communities from seeing themselves ethically represented, and hindering dominant cultures from recognizing the inequity of being persistently present in the world that they live in. My research begins from the need and desire to resist these normalized practices of culturally misconceiving diverse childhoods. While honoring the works of many scholars of color and queer scholars who have spoken about the experiences of growing up in *Otherhood*, I want to make a meaningful contribution that will provide deep observations and clearly analyze, in particular, the ways in which *Otherhoods* manifest themselves in Korean American literature for youth.

Othered Bodies and Empowering Relationships

Now that I’ve laid out the framework for this dissertation, I want to provide an example of how I will demonstrate my analyses using a Korean American novel for youth.

How does it feel to live inside an Othered body? And how does it feel to *mature* inside an Othered body? The 2008 YA novel, *The Fold*, written by An Na—who is an award-winning writer

and the first Asian American to win a Printz Medal, provides an illuminating account for these questions. *The Fold* trails the process of maturation of a Korean American high school student Joyce who struggles with self-image and White supremacist standards of beauty that deeply impact her identity formation. While having a crush on a mixed Korean boy from school, John Ford Kang (often referred to as “JFK”), Joyce’s overbearing Gomo (aunt) offers to pay for double eyelid fold surgery—blepharoplasty—to “improve” her appearance, which may (or may not) enable Joyce to get the boy she wants. At first when Gomo makes this offer, Joyce doesn’t have much desire to change her looks. However, her need to change her appearance is acutely induced after John mistakes her for Lynn Song, who is “the embodiment of the stereotypical Asian student” with her thick glasses, academic achievements, and poor fashion sense (19). Joyce’s best friend, Gina, criticizes John’s internalized racism by stating, “Nice is NOT someone who confuses you with the only other freakin’ Asian girl in your class” (33). Often, our Asianness is all that is seen, the *only* thing that is seen. This erasure of individuality and personhood pushes Joyce to seek out a change in her appearance to differentiate herself from the other Asian girl in her class, while her adoration for the mixed Korean and White boy, John, only escalates her desire to modify her looks. Wanting to change one’s appearance and being seen as unique may be common impulses to teenagers in capitalist and materialistic cultures. However, in what seems like a common rite-of-passage, there is a sharp sense of racial shame for Joyce as she strives to deal with the desires to reject a stereotypical image of Asians and become vicinal to a boy who embodies Whiteness. This racial shame eventually turns into a self-negating force. Negation of identity and assimilation to Whiteness are both integral functions of the model minority myth that hinders Asian folks from embodying wholeness, instead forcing us to inhabit a perpetual performativity. As

Valerie Ooka Pang, et al., claim, “Children from ethnically diverse communities face the dilemma of cultural assimilation because of the strong messages children receive from mainstream society to ‘fit into’ the general community” (218). Joyce feels the pressure to assimilate into the community that’s deemed “general,” meaning, the dominant White American community. However, this pressure comes as a complex play of negotiation between multiple value systems since Asian Americans youths “are caught in a triple bind: pressured to remain faithful to ancestral heritage, while at the same time admonished to assimilate and become fully American, but ultimately finding that because of their Asian genes, many Americans will never give them full acceptance,” as rightly argued by Dolores De Manuel and Rocío G. Davis (vi-vii). This is a key element in Joyce’s trajectory of growing up. Her maturation is highly dependent upon her ability to navigate through the racial shame that intensifies as she matures into the Othered body of an Asian person.

The remarkable capacity of Na’s *The Fold* involves the ways in which the narrative explores and unpacks the multifaceted aspects of the model minority myth. Joyce’s crush, John, is described as “snowmen,” by many of Joyce’s Korean friends, or “banana,” by her best friend, Gina, for being “yellow on the outside, white on the inside”; he “would never get caught dead hanging out with some Asian chick” (32). The narrative unpacks his ontological distance from his Koreanness that allows him to inhabit a sense of belonging in a predominantly White institution (PWI) and to steer clear of the possibility of occupying an outcast status as a minority, a Korean.

Even though he was Asian, he looked and acted like everyone else. Like someone who belonged in this school, in this neighborhood, with all these students. Not an immigrant that moved

into the area or faked an address to attend one of the best schools in Orangedale. Maybe it was because he was only half Asian and looked like some movie star. Or maybe it was because he knew he had an exotic model mother who probably didn't cook kimchee ji-geh at home, stinking up the entire house.... And if John's mom didn't cook Korean food, then John's dad had to get his Korean food fix somehow because Koreans can't live without their food. The addictive combination of garlic, chili, and salt must be imprinted on Koreans from birth.

(20-21)

The note on Korean food and cooking is particularly intriguing here because the narrative suggests that not only one's bloodline, but also the rituals, traditions, and the culturally attained tasting palate facilitated in the home environment, enable a person to embody their Korean heritage. Being biracial and appearing to be racially ambiguous *and* lacking a cultural presence in his life separate John from Joyce, and more importantly, from the Korean immigrant community in Orangedale.

While John is ontologically adjacent to Whiteness, he is described as possessing several White material features inherited from his White mother. John "towered over his blond surfer friends, his frame tall and muscular, unlike so many other stringbean Korean guys. But then, he was only half Korean and half something else. Dutch or German or something else, exotic. European" (7). In particular, Joyce obsesses over John's "beautiful, gorgeous, brown-green eyes" that hint at his European traits that Joyce herself cannot embody (24). Just as I embodied and just as Cathy Park Hong wrote about in *Minor Feelings* with her strong sense of envy toward Whiteness while she grew up as a Korean American child, Joyce's crush on John is not quite as simple as falling for the cutest and

the most popular guy in school. Joyce's feelings for John are ridden with White envy and the desire to assimilate into Whiteness. Attracting John—who dates only White girls—means that she can be just as beautiful as those girls, just as *White*.

However, the trajectory of John as a character is written multidimensionally as the plot develops, because his “banana” tendencies eventually transform when his White mother leaves his Korean father, and the father and son strive to reconnect with their Korean roots in order to cope with their sense of loss and estrangement. John's struggle is common to many biracial Korean American children. Feeling neither Korean or American enough, they often experience a complex sense of confusion and the pressure to “pick one side” instead of embracing their mixed identity as a whole. Although differently manifested in their embodiments, Joyce and John both feel the sociopolitical pressure that forces Asian folks into assimilation. In “Purity, Impurity, and Separation” Argentine feminist philosopher María Lugones discusses the oppressor's desire to separate the two or multiple identities of the Other, so that they can easily dominate and control.

I think of the attempt at control exercised by those who possess both power and the categorical eye and who attempt to split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements (as in egg white and egg yolk) for the purposes of control. Control over creativity. And I think of something in the middle of either/or, something impure, something or someone mestizo, as both separated, curdled, and resisting in its curdled state. Mestizaje defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into

pure parts. In this play of assertion and rejection, the mestiza is unclassifiable, unmanageable.

She has no pure parts to be “had,” controlled. (“Purity,” 460)

While the protagonist of *The Fold* struggles to navigate her maturation process with the sense of racial shame that coerces her to embody ever more Whiteness, the boy she has a crush on negotiates the trajectory of growing up with a biracial identity and the “play of assertion and rejection” with the fragmentation of identity as Lugones puts it (“Purity,” 460). Na’s *The Fold* strategically uses the teen drama between these two Korean American characters to provide an insightful exploration of the various symptoms of identity struggles that Korean American youth experience while growing up, including White envy, the pressure to assimilate, and fragmentation.

The politics of gender is also an important element in *The Fold* that impacts the process of maturation. The discussion of racialized misogyny on Asian bodies is best illustrated by the character of Gomo, Joyce’s aunt and her father’s older sister. Gomo—often referred to as “Michael” by Joyce and her younger brother Andy, after “the singer who had altered his appearance beyond recognition” (39)—has undergone numerous plastic surgeries and has received so much Botox that she no longer has any facial expressions. Seemingly presented as a shallow and eccentric figure, her character, however, embodies a deep and heavy resonance echoing from acute racial shame, as her nickname suggests, which is only amplified by society’s racial hatred and prejudice against her gender. Part of Joyce’s growth is to eventually recognize the racial trauma that has led Gomo to alter herself so radically. Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies and Korean feminist Sharon Heijin Lee, in her article “Beauty Between Empires: Global Feminism, Plastic Surgery, and the Trouble with Self-

Esteem,” argues that “beauty is mediated through variously structured fields of power specific to the geopolitical context” (3) and that “cosmetic surgery—and more specifically the double eyelid surgery, as it is colloquially known—has come to signify Korean (and in many instances, Korean and Asian American) women’s acquiescence not only to patriarchal oppression but to racial oppression as well” (4).

While the cis-male characters in the narrative do also suffer from White supremacist standards of beauty, like Joyce’s brother Andy who takes shark liver pills to grow taller, the extent to which one’s entire value depends on beauty is different for the cis-female characters in the book. For example, when driving Joyce to her first consultation with the plastic surgeon, Gomo shares her painful immigration story. Gomo says:

Before I came to the United States with your first uncle Joseph, I was the most beautiful girl in my village. [...] When Joseph finally brought me to the United States, do you know what his family said to me? [...] They told me how ugly I was. How could he fall in love with some slanted-eye gook? They would not even talk to me. [...] In America, everyone is always chasing their dream. I only wanted what I had lost when I moved to this country. I only wanted to be beautiful again. (158-59)

Marrying into a White family is often a traumatizing experience for not only Asians but also many BIPOC. I still remember distinctly how I felt when I was introduced to the extended family of my partner, who is White, on my first Christmas in the United States. My experience wasn’t vastly different from Gomo’s in *The Fold*. Although there weren’t any direct racial slurs thrown at me, I

could feel the nonverbal signals of hate all over the house. The Christmas decorations in the house screamed all kinds of positive values of belonging, like, joy, togetherness, and love, but all I could feel within that space was intolerance, discrimination, a fraught sense of unity, and hatred. The harsh stares and the cold shoulders were not as difficult to endure as the ways in which the family completely ignored me the whole night. My partner, who was the only person keeping me company, was also outcasted for simply bringing an Asian person into the all-White household. The reason why Gomo's story resonates so sharply with me is because her character encapsulates the sociopolitical shame that falls upon Asian women who marry White people. Due to her race and gender, she feels degraded and demeaned for her very existence. Being deemed ugly because of her racial features is one thing, but being deemed worthless because of it is quite another, as women are often considered only as valuable as their beauty in misogynistic societies. What Gomo experiences as the traumatizing event that alters her self-identity *and* her material features through plastic surgery is caused by both the White supremacist ideologies and gender politics in the United States.

There are also other characters in *The Fold* that represent various struggles of the Korean immigrant community. Helen, Joyce's older sister, who is "the Korean poster girl" (202), aspires to become a doctor. Helen is perfect in every way on the surface, but she constantly battles with self-negation as she strives to fulfill the crushing weight of the Korean American dream imposed on her by her parents. While Helen looks as if she has everything that people deem valuable, she "had sacrificed to help her family instead of doing what she wanted" (202).

For Helen, becoming a doctor and stepping up the social ladder is not only her dream, but is also a generational dream of the Korean American family that wishes to escape the perpetual second-class citizen status that they inhabit as Asian Americans in the United States. It is important to note that many Asian Americans who held higher social statuses before immigration by having occupations such as doctors, lawyers, and accountants, end up working in lower class status jobs in the U.S. after immigration. Further, Helen's self-negation is coupled by her struggle to come out as a lesbian in the strictly religious environment of her Korean American community. Helen confesses to Joyce, "I've been living my whole life trying to please others [...] And here I am back to square one. Still trying to find out what's true to me" (203-04). Like Joyce, Helen is pushed to negotiate between multiple complex sociopolitical forces as an Other in order to embrace and develop her identity fully.

In "Beauty is in the Eye of the West: An Analysis of An Na's *The Fold*," Joanne Yi claims that "Na demonstrates how marginalized structures or minorities (e.g., culture, gender, sexual orientation) may be impacted by dominances and how these subgroups can empower themselves by rejecting dominant or 'normative' ideals" (56). Indeed, Joyce in *The Fold* showcases how she is impacted by systems of dominance but gradually empowers herself by developing more complex relationships with others around her. For one thing, her distanced relationship to her sister, Helen, is narrowed when she opens up to Joyce and confesses her sexual orientation and her masked pressure of carrying the weight of their family's expectations. For another, as Joyce comforts her older sister, she learns that possessing the ideal image of beauty and respect as Helen does will not guarantee her any sense of authenticity or happiness. Helen advises Joyce, "It's hard to feel all right with yourself when everything around you is

saying that you have to look a certain way, act and love a certain way.... You have to know what is true to you. Know who you are and what matters the most to you” (203). What Helen wisely points out is that what is “true” to Joyce is the knowledge that comes from within, rather than the external—what other people say is true for her. Helen understands this more acutely than her younger sister because Helen’s central struggle has always been negotiating between her own desires, wishes, and truths while also trying to please others and keep up with appearances.

Another important relationship that impacts Joyce in her path to empowerment is the one with Gina, her best friend, who is also Korean American. After Joyce meets with her plastic surgeon and receives a temporary double fold to her eyelids with a cosmetic glue, Gina notices how Joyce acts differently from her normal self. Hanging out around Lisa, the “cool” Korean girl who is in college and has received multiple plastic surgeries, Joyce takes Lisa’s side when tension builds between her and Gina. After the incident, Gina’s boyfriend, Sam, tells Joyce how Gina is afraid of losing Joyce as a friend. Sam says to Joyce, ““She thinks you look great with those things’ Sam pointed to his eyes. ‘But she doesn’t want you to change because of them.’” (216). Considering her recent actions and empathizing with her friend, Joyce realizes the shift in her mind that’s been occurring as she has paid more attention to her eyelids: “I guess I was getting pretty obsessed with the way I looked” (216). As Joyce changes the way she looks, she realizes that she is changing not only her physical features but also her consciousness, and naturally, her relationship with her beloved friend.

Navigating through these complex relationships, Joyce finally decides not to go through with the surgery and finds the courage to tell Gomo about her decision. Instead, she asks Gomo to use the

money to “help Gina get clear braces for her teeth” (246), so that she doesn’t have to wear the thick, metal brace that Gina is dreading. To this, Gomo encourages Joyce, “You are just like me. Such a big heart” (246). The narrative ends on that transformative note as Joyce is able to accept Gomo and sees herself *as* herself. In the beginning of the novel, Joyce has vilified Gomo as much as she feared her; Joyce has not understood the painful story behind Gomo’s plastic surgeries. At the end, however, the narrative demonstrates how Joyce understands Gomo as someone who has felt disempowered by the same source of violence yet who also empowers herself in a way that feels true to her and uses it to help others. The way Joyce empowers herself is by nurturing an ability to understand others’ vulnerabilities and finding herself in the community of her own people and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

My goal in this chapter is to make what’s made invisible visible. As De Manuel and Davis assert, Asian American children are “often invisible in the country where they are growing up, trying to be part of the white majority or of the ‘model minority’ and thus being exemplary at blending in, keeping quiet, and knowing their place” (vii). Junko Yokota argues, moreover, that even though “there has been considerable progress in terms of the diversity of countries represented, the genre published, and the themes addressed, there is always room for more, because of so much of the Asian world is still underrepresented” (18). In mainstream U.S. culture, where diverse childhoods are actively silenced, examining the stories of childhoods that are being experienced by Korean and Korean American children of today feels consistently urgent. Exploring how the experience of being Othered as a Korean American impacts the process of growth, I recognize that *Otherhood* is non-linear, dynamic, and does

not suddenly arrive and finalize itself at one's achieving of independence. Rather, the child's ontological awareness shifts significantly from estrangement to belonging. The child, who starts the narrative by recognizing themselves as the Other, overturns their perception and faces the new visions of the Self.

CHAPTER II: HOW TO BE FAT, QUEER, AND KOREAN

I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry “home” on my back.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

Though we lost all our possessions,

I felt

A strange relief

To see my home explode in the rearview mirror.

—Bhanu Kapil

“Your legs are about the size of my arms!” screamed umma in radiating delight.

I met Umma at Yeokgok, the subway station near my family’s apartment where I spent most of my childhood. As soon as she spotted me in the crowd, she quickly scanned my body before she shouted out her approval amid all the lunchtime crowd. It was the first thing she said to me after seeing me for the first time in two years. Korean June is hot and humid, so I wore a pair of black high-waisted shorts and a matching gingham blouse with puffy sleeves. I don’t dress this feminine anymore and this outfit screamed, *The Good Korean Girl*. The tight fit of the clothing made my body feel like a cage. But I barely dress like myself when I’m in Korea. I looked down at my bare thighs. They were

definitely the thinnest they had been in years. I knew it because I made sure of it. Because I was performing. I was doing cosplay. Today, I was *The Good Korean Girl*.

“What are you talking about? They’re not that thin,” I dismissed Umma, wishing to avoid a conversation about my body.

Umma continued to thoroughly examine my body and I felt myself getting nervous with every passing second. Soon, she emitted a powerful air of contentment as she smiled at me.

“You look beautiful. You are so thin!” she shouted.

Beauty and thinness are synonyms in my homeland. I felt like the weight of the past several months was lifting immediately. In all those months before my arrival in South Korea when I limited my carb intake to under 40 grams a day and weighed myself on the scale every single morning, I hoped to steer clear of any conflict with my mother about my weight. During the one month in summer while I was off school and spent time with my family in Korea, I wanted to avoid fighting with her as much as I could. So, I made myself as small as possible. I knew how unhealthy all this was. But I had accepted sometime in my childhood that my relationship with Umma would always remain that way—unhealthy—and that it was easier to change myself than trying to change her. But I was staying for only one month, anyway. My thought process was: If my umma’s not pleased with the way my body looks, she won’t stop criticizing it until I go back to the States. If she keeps criticizing my body while I stay, I would be triggered back to all the childhood memories that I try to suppress with all my might. But I couldn’t *not* see her. I couldn’t just cut her out of my life. I still loved her. So, instead, I diligently carved out my body to fit the mold that she’d made in order to love me. I had lost 20 pounds

to meet her. And I achieved my goal. Umma was happy. Relief rushed in like a drug. So did sadness. They mixed like a potent cocktail inside me, and I swallowed instead of sipping. I instantly felt the dizzying numbness that followed. I welcomed it. I shoved my feelings aside.

“I saw your aunt yesterday. She’s doing well,” said Umma as we walked toward a restaurant for lunch.

“Oh yeah? That’s good,” I replied cheerfully.

“Ever since she remarried, she got so fat I almost couldn’t recognize her!” said umma, sounding a little too giddy about my aunt’s sudden bodily transformation.

“I’m sure she still looks great,” I shrugged. The fact that we’ve already landed on the subject of body image didn’t surprise me, but it bothered me, still. I wished I could just shrug this conversation off entirely.

“No, she’s *really* fat now. I was so shocked! But when I showed her some recent pictures of you, she said *you* got fat,” said Umma with an annoyed snort.

“Did she?” It’s amazing how the conversation switches back to *my* weight already.

“And I said, ‘No, she has lost a lot of weight ever since.’ And do you know what she said to me? She said, ‘Is she a rubber band or something? Gaining and losing weight just like that?’ She talks so snidely all the time, and I don’t know why she’s like that” complained my umma with a tone of authority.

Umma sounded annoyed and proud at the same time. Annoyed at my aunt, her sister who thinks I'm fat. Proud of me, the daughter who successfully loses her weight to prove her wrong. Then, I realized that there's something *off* in Umma's story. She didn't know I had lost weight until a few minutes ago, and she had that conversation with my aunt yesterday before she even saw me. I thought to myself: *Did she make it up that I lost weight? What if I didn't? Why would she say that to my aunt?*

I kept walking beside Umma toward the restaurant in silence. I heard the light jingle of the diet pill bottle inside my purse. It whispered with the rhythm of my steps: *Too fat. Too fat. Too fat.* I made a mental reminder to chug them down before my meal without Umma knowing. I was so sick of myself. I was so sick of all *this*. But at least we could pretend that everything between us was just fine. At least we were going to be fine this summer. And I'd go back to the States soon where no one here would look at my body. But for now, I was shot back to my childhood. My stakes were high.

When I was dieting in preparation for Korea, I didn't tell others. I was afraid of peoples' judgement. No, I was afraid of *Americans'* judgment. What would people think? *Oh, come on, Nina, you're not fat! Be yourself! Be confident! Give the love and acceptance you give to others to YOURSELF! Self-love, baby!* It's so exhausting to be confident all the time in the nation of self-love. I don't have the energy to explain how it's different. How it's different when you have a Korean mom and a Korean society in the back of your head. So, I didn't. At mealtimes, as I munched slices of avocado and chicken breast, I told people that avoiding carbs helps with my heartburn, which was true. But it wasn't the whole story. The whole story was too heavy for me to deliver. Especially to people who don't understand the home that I carry.

In childhood, my body was never just mine. As Umma gained weight after giving birth to me, she looked at mine as if it was an extension of her own. She dressed me in the kinds of clothes she couldn't wear anymore because of her weight gain, and at mealtimes, she restricted the kinds of food and how much I ate. As if I was her second chance. When I protested, she would say that she didn't want me to get fat like her, and that I would have to forever watch my weight to not become like her. As a child, I couldn't understand it. What I wanted was to *be* like her. I thought umma was the most beautiful person in the world. I used to tell her that I was glad she was my umma because other moms looked too thin, and I didn't think it would feel as good to hug them. It didn't matter to her, though. She hated her body her entire life. And she hated my body to become like hers. For most of my youth, I suffered from eating disorders. And it is only recently that I've recognized my habits around eating as mental health conditions and realized where they came from.

My summer in Korea passed without a fight with my umma and I returned from the 24/7 state of war with my own body. Living in America has its own pitfalls, but I feel more at ease with my size. People here rarely think of me as overweight, whereas in Korea, people often do. And Koreans make sure I know it. Not just umma, but other family members, friends, acquaintances, even strangers. A few years ago, my brother pointed his finger at my stomach and asked, "Why is your belly so protruding?" with a genuinely disturbed look on his face. And then there was the time when a photographer taking our family photo mistook my brother and me as a married couple. She asked, "You're pregnant, right?" as if pregnancy is the only reason that's okay for not having a flat stomach. Not to mention the toxicity of when a body is presented as female, how reproductive fulfillment is

considered a given social norm. Because my body was objectified and regarded as overweight by Koreans, it becomes “a matter of public record in many aspects” (120), as Roxane Gay puts it in *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*. It resonates with me profoundly when Gay ruminates, “Your body is constantly and prominently on display. People project assumed narratives onto your body and are not at all interested in the truth of your body, whatever that truth might be” (120). Unfortunately, the range of weight that is culturally acceptable for women is very narrow in the States, too, but in my homeland, I feel as though I’m seen overweight and out of “the norm” of body images unless I’m skin and bones. As Amy Erdman Farrell asserts, “Like all other forms of stigma, fat stigma is relative, dependent on the historical and cultural context. Perceptions about fat ... differ from place to place from time to time” (7). The extra room I’m allowed to take in most social spaces in the United States feels freeing, so I eat again. Carbs and all. I take up more space. I live. I know that the mold that Umma put me to fit into wasn’t entirely her own creation. I know that she inherited it first from her own family to fit her body into, and then passed it onto me. It doesn’t make it okay or better, but it’s the way it is. Although I’m thousands of miles away from my homeland, in the United States, I feel at *home*. A *new* home. Because I stop running away.

There is a certain parallel to my feelings about my size and my queerness around my mother and my homeland culture, and I think of my life as a constant fugitive state, a warfare. I run from them in order to be myself and to survive. Never in my life have I thought it was safe to be my natural size around my mother and in my homeland. Never in my life have I considered revealing my queerness to my parents or to anyone I know in my homeland, either. What made me an Other in my homeland

culture didn't allow me to live in my own embodiment. As Jackie Wykes suggests in the introduction to *Queering Fat Embodiment*, there has recently been an increasing scholarly interest in bringing the discourses of fatness and queerness together because "Both are—or have been—at the centre of moral panics in which they are conceived of as perverse, excessive, unnatural, and a threat to the social order" (3). There are also a few more grounds on which scholars of fat studies see the commonalities between fat and queer bodies. Robyn Longhurst posits that fat bodies can be "closeted" like queer bodies because "Binging, compulsive exercising, using laxatives in an attempt to lose weight, constant weighing of foods and the self, calorie counting, measuring body parts, calculating Body Mass Index" that often surround the materiality of the fat body often "remain closeted" (17). As queer individuals keep their gender and sexual identity hidden from their social life, fat people's behaviors relating to their embodied reality can be understood with the metaphor of the closet. Furthermore, Kathleen LeBesco postulates that, like trans people who "intentionally transition from one side of a sex or gender dichotomy to the other on a permanent basis," fat people "who intentionally diet or undergo weight loss surgery" can also be understood in the similar fluidity of bodily transition and the ways in which both group are scrutinized by the mainstream culture with a set of preconceived notions of health, morality, and beauty (52).

Compared to when I was a child, South Korea's opened more to LGBTQIA2+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Agender/Asexual, Two-Spirit, and more) cultures now, but the lack of representation, awareness, community, public education, and the general air of hatred toward queerness that pervades Korean society still creates indisputable factors that make

it impossible for many queer Korean people to live with authenticity. The United States is not a completely safe place for queer people, either. Hate crimes targeting queer communities are reported regularly, and the banning of the books that represent queer characters and topics in schools is an everyday occurrence. I am still fearful about mass shootings when I'm in queer spaces like gay bars and nightclubs, and I get very nervous when I teach children's and YA books that deal with diverse gender identities and sexualities in classrooms. Even so, I still talk about my queerness in public and private spaces when I'm in this country. I can always find my queer community wherever I go. I buy from queer businesses and consume queer arts in various media. I wear more gender-nonconforming clothes than I ever would when I'm in Korea. All the things that are less accessible for me in my homeland. All my life, I've run from home to find refuge. For fugitives, *unbelonging* can mean survival and a way of life. As Gloria Anzaldúa said, my culture, too, betrayed me, and "I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture" (43). As I look back on my childhood memories of struggling to live with authenticity and coming to reclaim my embodied reality, I began to wonder: What does it mean to embrace *unbelonging* as a way of life? How does it contribute to a child's process of growth? I came to conclude that *unbelonging* from one's home and home culture serves as a survival tactic for Othered youth, and eventually, they *reconstruct* the concept of home and kinship with a new community on the foundation of their shared memories of *unbelonging*.

***Unbelonging* as a Way of Life**

In this section, I explain what I mean by "*unbelonging*," and how I envision this as a useful analytical tool for examining texts that represent queer and other minoritized youths, building my work on the foundation of several works by distinguished queer scholars.

I define *unbelonging* as a survival tactic for an Other. When home is an inhospitable environment for a child or teenager, they find ways to disassociate their identity from home in order to sustain their reality and survive. Here, “home” is both a literal and ideological concept. For an Othered child, “home” may be their place of residence where their family members/figures oppress them as a socially minoritized subject (being fat, queer, female, dark-skinned, neurodivergent, etc.), or “home” could also refer to their “home culture,” where systems of oppression in culturally specific ways keep them from living with authenticity and safety. This relationship that an Other has with their home is described vividly by Anzaldúa in *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, the *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us.... Alienated from her mother culture, “alien” in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of the Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the space between the different worlds she inhabits. (42)

As a queer Chicana woman living between cultures, Anzaldúa’s account of negotiating her identities for different worlds she inhabited—both internally and externally—is resonant to many Othered identities. As I argued in the previous chapter, children with mixed cultural roots often find themselves “in between” spaces where they feel caught between different value systems, feeling inadequate in both cultures, and pushed to limit themselves with one identity prioritized over the

other. Discussing her reality as an outsider to mainstream culture, Lugones also contends that “women of color in the U.S. practice ‘world’-traveling” as an epistemological practice. Lugones adds, “much of our traveling is done unwilfully to hostile White/Anglo ‘worlds’” (*Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 77). In other instances, queer children feel the need to hide their identity from family figures and society in fear of rejection, abandonment, and hate. This, however, is not only limited to queer children’s reality. Children with any minoritized identity can feel the need to hide parts of themselves in their home environment or bigger social spaces such as “the mother culture,” as Anzaldúa claims, in order to survive. Going back home to South Korea, *my* mother culture, has always had a major impact on me. I always feel the fear of going home before my travel and I don’t feel that I will be taken in as who I truly am by my mother or my mother culture. Not only when I’m physically in Korea, but also when I’m in a Korean community in the States, too, due to transnationalism. When people of my culture migrate, they also bring the culture to our new home. I feel the need to hide parts of who I am—whether it’s my queerness or body weight—when I’m with the people who carry my home.

This fear of abandonment, rejection, and alienation from home articulated by Anzaldúa is also echoed in Sara Ahmed’s writing on queer phenomenology. Ahmed discusses the concept of orientation and heteronormative inhabitances, and how certain bodies are welcome while leaving out Othered bodies.

The work of inhabitance involves orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space. If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space,

then disorientation occurs when that extension fails. Or we could say that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others. (*Queer Phenomenology*, 11)

What both Anzaldúa and Ahmed point out here with the notion of home/inhabitation is the way in which social spaces—home, school, workplaces, and others—are constructed in consideration of certain bodies that are deemed “the social norm,” in terms of such labels as heterosexuality and thinness, that fail to cater to Othered bodies that do not align with normative orientations in those spaces. As Ahmed further clarifies, “The lesbian body does not extend the shape of this world, as a world organized round the form of the heterosexual couple” (*Queer Phenomenology*, 20). Dominant cultures do not accommodate Others by design. Systems of power intend to block and control minoritized desires and movements, leaving them forgotten in the collective cultural amnesia. Anzaldúa elucidates, “Culture forms our belief. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture. Culture is made by those in power” (38). Since home—both in the domestic and cultural sense—is created within these systems of power, it is controlled and mediated by the dominant culture’s systems of power. However, what stems from such a disorientation is the Othered child’s willing actions to stray from the expectations of power and enact *unbelonging* from an inhabitation that fails them.

The concept of home is especially relevant to children’s identity formation while they are growing. The parental figures’ ideological stances on social subjects such as sexual orientation and gender identity play a major role in the child’s sense of selfhood and self-expression. Jessica Fields

argues that straight parents may find that “the moral value of being mothers and fathers rests on their having raised ‘normal’ women and men,” and further, “[t]hey therein appeal to gendered and often sexist understandings of family and sexuality. ‘Parent’ proves to be a moral identity that not only lends straight mothers and fathers credibility as spokespeople for queer communities but also threatens to perpetuate ‘heteronormativity,’ the systemic privileging of the heterosexual couple as the social and sexual ideal” (166). When the ideologies of the home do not validate children’s developing identities, they learn to navigate this social space by knowing how and when to dissociate themselves from its expectations. Explaining the expectations of family, or the idea of “inheriting the family line,” Ahmed discusses families’ heteronormative expectations of their children and children’s decision to refuse such an inheritance as a “breaking point”:

The heterosexual couple becomes a “point” along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background. The background *then is not simply behind the child*: it is what the child is asked to aspire *toward*. The background, given in this way, can orientate us toward the future: it is where the child is asked to direct its desire by accepting the family line as its own inheritance. There is pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care, which pushes us along specific paths.... And yet, these places where we are under pressure don’t always mean we stay on line; at certain points we can refuse the inheritance—at points that are often lived as “breaking points.” (*Queer Phenomenology*, 90, italics in the original)

For Ahmed, orientation is a useful term to describe the queer relationships to social spaces because queer children are constantly pushed to orient themselves toward heteronormative directions of the future, and these heteronormative spaces are organized in ways such that queer children cannot reach them. However, it is this feeling of “disorientation” that makes queer children reach *a breaking point*, as Ahmed puts it, and this is when *unbelonging* is enacted as a way of survival. Queer children in heteronormative families cannot follow the family line and its heteronormative orientation to embrace their identity and this breaking point, or failure, to fulfill a familial wish is integral to their identity formation, and further identity affirmation during growth.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam claims that a failure is distinctively a queer tool of survival and subversion:

Failing is something that queers do and have always done exceptionally well; ... failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods.

Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adult and children, winners and losers.... it [failure] also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (3)

By refusing to follow the line along a heteronormative course of life, queer failure preserves the anarchic impulses that children often display, and at the same time, it does the work of exposing the “precarious models of success by which American families live and die” (5), as Halberstam contends.

Unbelonging, however, is never a simple enactment. It is a constant negotiation and a push-and-pull movement. In other words, *unbelonging* is never an exit from a home, but rather, it is a *portal* to an alternate reality with different sets of value systems, rituals, and traditions that the child identifies themselves with outside their family/cultural life. The home culture and the alternate world coexist within the same inner space of an Othered child, while the portal allows them to disassociate from each one with flexibility, as needed. What complicates the process of *unbelonging* is what the word itself insinuates: the relational aspect. “Belonging” refers to a close, intimate relationship, or a feeling that comes from being a part of a relationship with someone or a group because you feel accepted and appreciated by them. In the core of “belonging,” there’s a relational dynamic, and that’s why I view *unbelonging* as a complicated process of negotiation instead of a clean-cut induction to separation, independence, and self-reliance. While a child may feel the need to disassociate from home and/or home culture, they may not be able to completely disengage themselves from them permanently. *Unbelonging*, thus, is non-linear and depends greatly on temporality and spatiality under various given circumstances for the Other. The Othered child adopts this tactic to survive in inhospitable home spaces and learns to negotiate their level of intimacies within such spaces.

In *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz defines *disidentification* as a survival strategy for minority subjects. It is a useful term to describe the nuances of *unbelonging* because the two concepts share similar dynamics with temporality and spatiality. Muñoz claims that disidentification is a strategy that an Other uses to “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not

conform” (4). However, Muñoz further explains that disidentification is not as simple as “disidentifying” oneself against their culture because at times “queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere” (5). Rather, it is a strategy that an Other adopts to work “within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (5). What Muñoz works to reveal with this analytical lens is the complex self-creation and recycled stereotypes that this constant negotiation allows an Other to transform themselves with. As Muñoz clarifies, disidentification “does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements: rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (12). For queers of color and other minoritized identities, choosing to conform or rebel against oppressive ideologies of society is not always simple, safe, or sufficient. They move forward, backward, forward again, and sometimes sidestep, based on the complex deductions of the given social situation they are faced with. This motion of compromise and push-and-pull is important to understanding the growth process of Othered children because it complicates the narratives of identity formation for the Other. The Othered child neither detaches themselves from home, nor aligns themselves with it completely. Within the portal of *unbelonging*, the child learns to take ownership of their own orientations toward multiple social dynamics.

Muñoz’s term, disidentification, is similar to *unbelonging* in the sense that they are both survival methods for an Other and that they are in constant negotiation with temporal and spatial dynamics. The difference, though, is that disidentification isn’t particularly focused on familial or intimate relationships in relation to home culture. Rather, Muñoz makes it clear that disidentification

is for the *public* life of an Other; he wasn't considering queer *children* as his focal point. Even though queerness is an important element in childhood because it is often in childhood that queer subjects learn to negotiate their identities and ways of survival in heteronormative and gender binary culture, children's experiences (and, moreover, minoritized queer children's experiences) are still underrepresented in cultural and literary studies. In the introduction to *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature*, Michelle Ann Abate and Kenneth Kidd rightfully argue, "While scholars of children's narrative have made productive use of lesbian/gay studies and Queer Theory, the reverse is not true as yet" (8). Unfortunately, even after more than a decade since their anthology was published in 2011, their statement still rings truth now as I write. However, in another article, Kidd contends that the "young adult genre has been extraordinarily receptive to lesbian/gay themes, largely because coming out is often described in the idiom of adolescence as an intense period of sexual attraction, sexual rebellion, and personal growth. In fact, coming-out novels for adults typically imitate young adult novels in both structure and themes" ("Introduction: Lesbian/Gay Literature" 114). Despite many of children's and YA literature's meaningful contribution to the cultural discourse of queer realities, "[t]he critical neglect of LGBT children's and YA literature might be attributed to the pervasive cultural anxieties surrounding the intersections of childhood and sexuality, combined with the frequent erasure of LGBT characters, themes, and issues within children's literature," according to Kristen Proels (287). Therefore, the omission of children as significant social subjects and the stories about queer children in the discussion of queer identities doesn't only make this discourse frail but also unethical.

As a children's literature scholar whose main area of research is identity, I center children and teenagers in this analysis and demonstrate how examining children's experiences as minoritized individuals plays a key role in expanding our cultural understandings of identity. While Queer Theory can benefit from being more inclusive and attentive to children's experiences, the exploration of queerness and the use of Queer Theory can offer many advantages to children's literature studies as we study the experiences of children. As Tison Pugh suggests, "queerness provides an apt metaphor for considering the psychosexual development of children, if one views queerness not as a synonym for *homosexuality* but as a descriptor of disruptions to prevailing cultural codes of sexual and gender normativity" (6, italics in the original).

Furthermore, Thomas Crisp writes, "It is not enough to comprehend the homosexual experience on a cognitive level; we must develop an empathetic understanding as well" (200). To form this empathetic understanding of more expansive queer experiences, the examination of queer youth literature is urgently necessary.

Embodying Multiple Homes

For most queer children, awareness of being "different" begins at home. "Home" is a significant concept in youth literature because it is in the center of, around, or away from "home" that protagonists' challenges lay. In other words, young people's stories often involve exploration of home because home is a place from which their individual, relational, and social lives develop. Mavis Reimer asserts, "Whatever the language of home, it is clear that children's literature of many cultures is deeply invested in the overlapping symbolic, structural, historical, material, psychological, gendered, and

political meanings that circulate around the idea of home” (98). In addition, in “Home and Away in Children’s Fiction,” Christopher Clausen differentiates children’s literature and adolescent literature by proposing, “When home is a privileged place, exempt from the most serious problems of life and civilization—when home is where we ought, on the whole, to stay—we are probably dealing with a story for children. When home is the chief place from which we must escape, either to grow up or ... to remain innocent, then we are involved in a story for adolescents or adults” (143). Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer also construct a formula similar to Clausen’s as they write that while “the home/away/home pattern is the most common storyline in children’s literature, adult fiction that deals with young people who leave home usually ends with the child choosing to stay away” (197-98). However, this model of “home” and “away” is based on a simplistic binary understandings of home and is much similar to Joseph Campbell’s theory of the hero’s journey, whose universalizing ideologies are problematic at best.¹⁰ Melissa B. Wilson and Kathy G. Short, on the other hand, introduce a new pattern of home in children’s literature called the “postmodern metaplot,” and this narrative construction “begins with the child being abandoned, rather than the child leaving home. The child’s journey is to construct a home within a postmodern milieu complete with competing truths and failed adults. Ultimately, the child’s postmodern journey ends with a very modern ideal of the child leading the adults to a hopeful ending, a home” (2). Although the postmodern metaplot of home offers a

¹⁰ Here, I’m referring to Campbell’s now much-challenged 1949 work in *The Hero with Thousand Faces*. Campbell believed that a universal narrative structure ran through every myth from virtually all nations, neglecting the unique specificities and traditions from each culture.

stronger alternative to the exhausted and simplified models of home that Clausen and Nodelman and Reimer suggest, its framing of home is still instilled in the binary understanding of home/away. As much as “the very definition of kinship is contested” (25), according to Judith Butler, the definition of home is also expanded in the twenty-first century as diverse communities of color and queer folx have theorized renewed epistemologies of home and “chosen families.” For many queer youths, “home” and “family” aren’t singular nouns in both material and psychological senses.

Based on my argument on *unbelonging*, I will now turn to a Korean American young adult novel, *I’ll Be the One* by Lyla Lee, to showcase how the process of *unbelonging* impacts the self-formation and self-affirmation of an Other, and how it allows a reconstruction of home and kinship for an Othered youth.

A New Way Home

How do we come home when our home isn’t a home? How do we ever fully leave home when we’ve built our lives around familial bonds that we can’t separate ourselves from? How do we loosen a bond that’s so *skintight*, and how do strangers become our new kin?

The protagonist of Lyla Lee’s 2020 YA novel, *I’ll Be the One*, reflects on these questions of home and bonding as the plot develops. Skye Shin, or Shin Haneul, is a queer Korean American high school student living in Orange County, south of Los Angeles, who dreams of becoming a Korean pop star. To achieve her dream, she enters herself into *You’re My Shining Star*, a K-pop competition survival show in LA hosted by a South Korean broadcasting company and various celebrities. While striving to make her dream come true through this golden opportunity, Skye explores her pained

relationship with her mother, who doesn't approve of Skye's pursuit of dancing and being publicly visible because of her body weight. At the same time, Skye nurtures new relationships with other queer Korean youths she meets in the competition and creates a new community of support and kinship for herself.

Skye faces three major challenges as she pursues her dream. First, Skye is pushed to negotiate her values between her two different cultures—Korean and American—while competing to become a K-pop star as a Korean American. Second, Skye must learn how to dissociate herself from her own home culture (both familial and ethnic) in order to establish and affirm her identity. And third, Skye becomes emotionally vulnerable with the members of her newly found queer community in ways that allow her to set healthy personal boundaries from the social structures and familial relationships that prevent her from living with authenticity and integrity. I will argue that, through these three major challenges in the narrative, Skye is able to learn and practice the skill of *unbelonging* as a survival tactic and live a queer way of life during her growth process.

The first challenge that Skye faces—the negotiation between Korean and American cultures—is clearly introduced from the beginning of the narrative. The story begins as Skye arrives at the K-pop competition venue and registers herself as a contestant. She introduces herself, “My name is Shin Haneul, but my American name is Skye” (2). Having multiple names and cherishing all different components and variations of one's name are often important social traditions for Asians and other identities with mixed cultural roots. Skye explains how this cultural practice of valuing her roots is important to her by adding, “For my Korean name, I make sure to say my last name first, like my

parents taught me to do. I've always loved both my names, since haneul literally means 'sky' in Korean. Skye was just a cool variant of Sky that Dad chose for me when I said I wanted an American name for school" (2). For Asians, our name in our heritage language denotes our inherited identity that makes a meaningful and complex contribution to who we are as a person. The practice of valuing our names for ourselves and asking others to do so equals procuring important parts of our identity. However, Skye struggles to be recognized as *both* Korean and American at the same time. She is often perceived "not Korean enough," by other Koreans due to her third culture identity as a Korean American (her identity as a Korean and Korean American). As if denying Skye's Korean identity, the Korean lady at the registration desk of the survival show persists in talking to Skye in English, even though Skye responds to her in fluent Korean. Baffled by this interaction in which she has been treated like a "foreigner" by her own people, Skye deliberately considers her response while being caught between two cultures. Skye thinks:

For a moment, I wonder if it's worth it to call her out for being rude. Normally, I would, especially since if we were in an American social context, complaining would actually do something. But we're smack-dab in the middle of Koreatown, where all the signs, restaurants, and even banks are Korean. At most, I'd probably get an evil eye from the lady for being a "rude American teenager." It just isn't worth it. (5)

With this recognition of cultural differences and the social disadvantage of her mixed identity, she chooses to stay silent and avoid further conflicts in her negotiations. Skye, in this temporality, leans toward her Korean value system in which not speaking up to an elder is considered proper.

However, this decision is later thwarted when Skye experiences a more direct aggression from a Korean judge of the K-pop competition. During the competition, one of the Korean judges discriminates against and fat shames Skye as she says, “There simply isn’t room in the industry for someone like you. You could have a great career if you were just a bit . . . thinner. You’re still young enough that losing weight should be easy for you. Why don’t you try a bit harder?” (205). In this instance of barefaced fat shaming, Skye chooses to stand up for herself. She defends herself by saying, “I’ve been on really extreme diets when I was a kid, before I realized that I’m perfectly fine the way I am. So, no, I will not ‘try a bit harder’ to lose weight, because that shouldn’t matter in terms of my musical career” (206). Although Skye recognizes that it is not culturally common for contestants to speak up for themselves in such a way in Korean culture and questions herself for doing so, she later realizes the value of speaking up as an Other and speaking *with* the people who may identify with her identity while watching the TV show. At first, the viewers of the show fat shame Skye on social media but the reaction gradually shifts as many viewers also share that Skye inspires them. However, the Korean judge disqualifies Skye and alludes that she is incapable of fitting into Korean culture in the competition. The judge announces, “Miss Shin has proven herself to be . . . problematic and unprofessional. Perhaps in an American competition, a contestant like her would be tolerated, but not here. Mr. Park and I have agreed that in the Korean music industry, such unprofessionalism would be not acceptable, and especially not in the world of dance” (223). Skye recognizes this as a backlash, and she knows that the judge’s discrimination against her is multilayered. First, on the baseline of the discrimination, there is the fatphobia of South Korean culture that is both rampant and extreme. Second, Skye’s refusal to conform and challenge the judges goes against the authoritarianism that is

also one of the biggest and most common societal issues of South Korea. And last, Skye's identity as a Korean and Korean American is used against her by the Korean authority with the collectivist mindset often typical in Korea and other East Asian cultures. Competing in a Korean survival show in America presents many challenges of cultural negotiations for Skye, and in the process, she learns when to rebel against her culture and when to strategically step aside from it. More important, she learns how to come to terms with the consequences of her choices in those negotiations. As a Korean American youth, she never leans completely toward one or the other cultural value system. For Skye, recognizing the need to negotiate between the two cultures that she identifies herself with simultaneously and mediating with different systems of power sustain her personhood with mixed cultural identity, so she can empower herself in complex social situations she encounters.

As Skye navigates between her cultures, she faces another challenge—the rising necessity to disassociate from the fatphobic and homophobic home culture often enacted by Korean parents, including her own. Skye's relationship with her home culture of Korea is closely related to her relationship with her mother. The Korean judge's fat shaming and its negative effects on Skye is mirrored in Skye's home life as her mother consistently discourages her pursuit of winning the show and shaming her body in the process. It is important to note that Skye's physical home is also not a home in the sense that her beloved father who truly accepts her is rarely home because of his job. The narrative also hints at the fact that the marriage between Skye's father and mother is not a happy one and that Skye's father also doesn't have much to come home to.

Skye's struggle with her body weight, induced by her mother, has been present throughout the entirety of her life. From the beginning of the story, Skye reminisces painfully, "*Fat girls can't dance*. I hear Mom's words in my head, over and over again like a broken record" (20, italics in the original). As the mother's shaming words repeat in Skye's mind, the negative interactions between Skye and her mother also persist as the K-pop competition continues. When Lee's narrative unpacks the mother's fatphobia, readers can perceive that her problem is both an individual issue initiated in her youth and also a symptom of a collective problem rooted deeply in Korean culture. On an individual level, Skye's mom was bullied in high school because of her own body weight, and thus she has struggled with body image her whole life. And this individual issue gets complicated when we consider the social backdrop of South Korea. As the mother's Korean assistant informs Skye, South Korean society's fatphobia is more blatant and harsher compared to that in the States. She says, "In Korea, people think the ideal weight for a young woman is one hundred and ten pounds. If you're any heavier, people give you a hard time about it. Including family and friends" (74). Furthermore, unlike Skye and Skye's father who grew up in the States, Skye's mother was "born and raised in Korea, where her parents brought her up with extremely high expectations during a huge recession," as Skye's father informs her (46). Because of her background and her identity as a first-generation immigrant, it is harder for Skye's mom to let go of the ideologies of Korean culture and embrace new perspectives and attitudes toward social issues, such as body image. As Skye explains in the narrative, what her mother really fears is how she's looked upon by her Korean relatives and acquaintances because of her daughter's size, for she might be considered a bad mother for raising her to become fat (40, 73). In Korean culture, "saving face" is one of the most important social norms. And the trouble between Skye and her mother around body

weight is ingrained in both cultural and generational differences between them. Because of this issue, Skye complains how difficult it is to interact with her mother when she says, “Dad and I tried to explain to Mom about how the culture is different in America, ... but she never budged” (53). This difficulty in communication and the cultural gap is very common in multi-generation immigrant families, and it’s a complicated sociopolitical issue that can’t easily be resolved with the kind of solutions for general relationship conflicts.

The cultural gap that Skye faces in the narrative also extends toward diverse sexual identities. As Skye meets other Korean American queer friends, she learns how their coming out to parents has had dire consequences because of Korean culture’s severe hostility to queer individuals. When her friend, Lana, talks about how her Korean parents constantly try to separate her from her girlfriend, Skye thinks, “I know this is probably what would happen if I ever dated a girl, too. I’ve thought about it plenty of times, and sometimes I’m attracted to girls more than I’m attracted to boys. But there’s no way my parents would be okay with it. Korea didn’t have a Pride festival until 2000, and even now, groups show up to Pride just to call people ‘sinners’” (56). Not only her friend, Lana, but also Skye’s romantic interest Henry Cho reveals a dark history related to his bisexuality and his parents. Henry confesses to Skye:

Things kind of exploded when they found out I had a boyfriend.... They paid off the person who took the photo of us so she wouldn’t post it online. And then, they offered my boyfriend an outrageous amount of money so he’d break up with me.... It was a threat disguised as a

bribe. My boyfriend, of course, completely lost it.... All of my friends were also friends with him, so. Yeah, I lost all my friends. That's why I have no friends left. (262)

Discussing the subject of bullying from peers that often befalls queer youth, Eric L. Tribunella attests that "childhood is a dangerous time; and children, rather than innocent little lambs, can be and often are ferocious and sometimes deadly tigers, especially to other children" (231). As much as homophobic parents may cause significant emotional and other physical damage to queer children, their peers can also inflict various substantial traumas. Since both groups, the parents and peers, are social subjects, their (sub)conscious ideologies are profoundly influenced by their communities and cultures.

Tribunella further adds, "Given the pervasive and hegemonic heteronormativity of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Euro-American culture, either heterosexuality or the assumption of future heterosexuality is typically understood as the default position" (233). Extending this observation, I would argue that such an assumption of heterosexuality as the default position is not only true but also *more extremely* enacted in Korean culture.

The way that Lee's narrative unpacks the subject of sexuality is deliberate and nuanced in ways that are similar to its discussion of fat shaming in South Korean culture. These systems of oppression both operate under cultural and generational influences, and Skye's understanding of their complexity is crucial in order for her to disassociate from these parts of her home culture so that she can survive as a queer person living between cultures. Learning more about her mother and her home culture's history, Skye develops a version of herself that is separate from the negative parts of her heritage to affirm her identity and envision the trajectory of her future. Skye suggests to Henry, "Let's not be

douchey homophobic parents, yeah?’.... ‘We’re like . . . the future of Koreans and Korean Americans, you know? We have to be better than our parents’ generation” (263). Here, Skye’s separation from her home culture contributes not only to her own empowerment as an individual but also to the futurity of queer Korean American identity. As Angel Daniel Matos and Jon Michael Wargo argue, “Because children have not been restricted, hampered, or defined by the influences of knowledge and experience, their futures are therefore more open—full of promise, potentiality, and the ability to imagine a place and time different from the present” (2).

Not only that, toward the end of the narrative, Skye is also able to set healthy emotional boundaries with her mother, which minimizes her negative influence. Skye ruminates, “Maybe I didn’t need her approval, after all. I know my worth, now more than ever. If this is all I’m ever going to get from her, then so be it. I don’t say ‘Thanks for believing in me,’ or ‘Thanks for always being there for me,’ because we both know those words would just be lies. That’s not the kind of relationship I have with Mom. It’s time I finally accept it” (313). By disassociating from her home relationship and culture, Skye, an Other, manages to protect her developing identity and sense of power. However, because relationships and cultural heritages are often complex, disassociating from them is never an easy or linear task. It is as messy as a person’s past, and as deeply rooted and complex as any trauma. It takes consistent care, change, and camaraderie with others, and Skye is able to practice it while both progressing and digressing.

Camaraderie is at the center of the last challenge that Skye confronts in the story. As Michael Cart and Christine A. Jenkins explain, “Stories that contain ‘queer consciousness’ show GLBTQ

characters in the context of their communities of GLBTQ people and their families of choice (and in recent years, often their families of origin as well)” (xx). By sharing queer experiences with other Korean contestants that she meets, Skye finds a new home with them from which she receives the love and support that she lacks in her home life. This camaraderie is what aids Skye in setting healthy emotional boundaries from harmful social dynamics—interactions with her mother and systems of oppression—that damage her selfhood, as I argued above. Skye’s friends group consists of the queer Korean youths—Lana, Tiffany, and Henry— she has met at the competition and each of them become a valuable social asset to Skye as the story progresses. There are distinctive moments in the narrative in which Skye’s friends offer the kind of support and protection she is in need of.

After a particularly taxing round of the K-pop competition, Skye and her friends decide to visit a Korean spa. At the spa, Skye experiences an emotional breakdown as she attempts to undress herself in front of her friends. Even though being naked in a Korean spa is a common practice, and Skye is used to the culture, she is afraid of revealing her body because of her past traumas with her mother’s fat shaming. However, Skye doesn’t recognize the depth of her traumas as she confesses to her friends,

“Every time my mom and I went [to a Korean spa] . . .” I finally say. “Well, she’s not really *abusive*, like she doesn’t hit me or anything, but she’d always comment on how everyone’s skinnier than me, and her comments about my body just added up. Like, I’m okay with my body. Most of the time. But she always made me feel like I’m not good enough. And because of that, I’m always afraid of meeting new people, period, since I’m scared they’ll be jerks like her.” (241)

As Skye confesses to her friends, she keeps going back and forth between describing the pain she feels from her mom's abuse and minimizing her issues at the same time. Observing this, Skye's friend, Lana, points out with a caring honesty, "I mean, that's another type of abuse, you know? Emotional. It obviously hurt you enough that it still bothers you today" (242). What Skye is going through here as a traumatized individual is, in Michelle Balaev's words, "the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and the world" (150). For traumatized people, the process of internal struggle, self-reflection, and external validation is integral to moving forward in one's process of healing. As Balaev elucidates, "Responses to traumatic events in fiction often cause the protagonist to turn inward and struggle with the past. This inward glance is paired with a growing awareness to the external world outside the individual mind" (164). Moving away from denial and numbing the pain are some of the first steps to healing, and Lana's validation helps Skye in this process. After reflecting on Lana's comment about her mother's emotional abuse, Skye finally admits, "I never thought of it as abusive....the sick feeling in my stomach after hearing Lana's words tells me some part of me knows she's right" (242).

When Skye first meets Lana and Tiffany, she is exceptionally gleeful because her school "has plenty of queer girls, but none of them are Asian except me" (33). Skye is able to bond with the friends she meets during the competition because she can relate to them like her kin, the people who also carry her *home* in many senses. At the end of the competition, Skye can locate her new home in the love and friendship she shares with Henry when she says, "I tell him the words I couldn't say to Mom. 'Thanks for believing in me for all this time'" (319). Skye's ability to establish her identity, navigating between

cultures and disassociating from harmful social dynamics, would not have been possible without the help and support from the new relationships that she develops with her friends.

On queer kinship and the concept of “chosen family” in queer community, Leah Claire Allen and John S. Garrison argue that “Queers have long relied on kinship as a meaningful site of self-actualization outside of the toxic, hierarchical nuclear family. *Chosen family* ostensibly provides the positive support and care denied the queer child in their family of origin and allows for stronger, better bonds between individuals” (232, italics in the original). Indeed, many queer youths experience traumatic expulsion—either voluntary or involuntary—from their family. As Jillian R. Scheer, et al., assert, “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals disproportionately experience potentially traumatic events, defined as adverse experiences that may have a traumatizing effect” (131). However, for queer youths, friendship can offer the depths and rewards of the emotional bonds that they need. However, the reasons why one may experience such trauma may extend beyond queerness and include other forms of oppression. As Gay discusses in her memoir *Hunger*, fatness and the family’s fatphobic pressure to change one’s embodiment, too, can be a motivation for leaving home and cutting family ties. For an Other, finding alternative forms of belonging is a crucial liberatory practice. Although Allen and Garrison affirm the validity of chosen family because of this, they challenge the neoliberal framing of the “choice” in the “chosen” family. Allen and Garrison attest, “*Chosen family* also reinforces the pernicious notion of the queer as consumer, choosing family members like products....Why do we accept this normative model of choice? Why have we resoundingly critiqued the ‘family’ portion of *chosen family* but left the equally complex notion of

choice mostly intact in this formulation?” (232, italics in the original). While I consider Allen and Garrison’s observation about the word “choice” to be perceptive, I disagree that queer friendship—or its more devoted form as chosen family— should necessarily be framed with consumer capitalism. The word “choice,” for many disenfranchised social groups, is often utilized because of their *lack* of access to freedom, not the abundance of it (think, for example, the popularized slogan of “My Body My Choice” of the United States women’s rights movement). While Allen and Garrison critique the “choice” of chosen family for “freedom of choice” being “the cornerstone of the very Western democratic individualism” (232), the reality is that both queer community and women’s movements use the word “choice” to reclaim the freedom that hostile social structures take away from them, and not because they have the luxury to always exercise their freedom as consumers in market economy. In Lee’s novel, Skye’s choice of her new community is meaningful to her because, as a queer, fat, and Korean American person living in contemporary U.S. culture, she lacks the freedom to express herself authentically and be accepted by the rigid norms of embodiment that (Korean) American society has established. Choice, when freedom is taken away from those who deserve it, is an act of rebellion and a reconstruction of a faulty system of power. As Butler claims, “kinship is a site of queer coinage, of a performative *re*-elaboration and recognition of binding ties made and *remade*” (41, italics added). Through reimagination, reconstruction, reclamation, and re-elaboration, queer kinship restores the sense of belonging that helps access one’s freedom and power.

Kinship is important for not only queer folks but other minoritized subjects because kinship forms the coalition that helps us resist and rebel against the systems that betray and erase us. Staying

vigilant together and protecting each other from harm have long been vital survival tactics for Others in history, which Skye and her friends discover the value of such a tradition of coalition with the help of one another.

Conclusion

To be fat, queer, and Korean is to inhabit multiple homes that coexist within one body, pushing and pulling one's identity with competing value systems and making new kinship formations with the people who carry the same home in their embodiments. For immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, the concept of home is often plural. For queer people (and other minoritized entities), family, too, can exist in multiplicity beyond the bloodline. Identity, then, may not be as simple as being made/unmade. Identity, then, may be like coming home, leaving home, returning home, and moving from one home to another, again, and again, as long as you find the connection.

CHAPTER III: HALMONI AND ME

Overlapping memory always longs for return,
the return of memory.

—Don Mee Choi

When does a war end?

When can I say your name and have it mean
only your name and not what you left behind?

—Ocean Vuong

When my halmoni was alive, I never really thought about her as compulsively as I do now. She was simply *there*. And that felt almost like a void of feelings. A default. It's like that everyday-feeling I get when I walk into my house after leaving it for a while. Everything is—unless someone other than me moved things around or brought in new objects—exactly the way they had been. An absence of anything noticeable or special. Halmoni used to give me that kind of feeling. She was someone who's related to me and shares my blood. To my childhood psyche, she was essentially someone who always showed up to all of our family gatherings, usually sitting in the center of the living room and munching something while her children and grandchildren talked on and on. She would occasionally chime in with her usual thunderous voice, approving or disapproving of something with passion. A

few of my cousins knew her better than I did because they'd lived with her, but for me, I barely had any direct interactions with Halmoni other than a few rare moments during holidays when I visited her with my parents.

But here's what's strange: when she passed away in 2006, she became more alive in my consciousness. Her absence made me keep asking about the meaning of her presence in my life and how her stories affected me. As much as I compulsively thought about my halmoni after her death, she also became one of the most frequent narrative subjects in my writing. I constantly felt the urge to write about her. And all kinds of stories and feelings about her—the stories I forgot even existed in my memories and the feelings I didn't know I'd feel—came alive on the pages again and again. I've never been a superstitious person, but I often played with the idea of Halmoni visiting me when I slept, whispering into my ears, *이 할멈 이야기를 해주세요, 네.* *Tell the stories of your grandmother,* without letting me know why she had such a wish for me to fulfill.

The thing is, Halmoni was a refugee. In the year before the Korean War broke out, she escaped the communist regime of North Korea and fled on foot to the south of our nation with a Catholic priest who could no longer practice his religion in the North. Halmoni and the priest walked hundreds of miles and swam a river in freezing January. She was only in her early twenties. The priest fell ill shortly after arriving in the south and passed away, but Halmoni got a job as a nurse in Seoul and carried on with her life. It's hard to fathom how she managed to do it, but I've learned that human superpowers in the time of survival exist everywhere. The stories about Halmoni, though, always felt more like myths to me than family anecdotes. Her stories were almost always set in the wildest

locations and in extraordinary times with dramatic details and sometimes with even supernatural forces. The time when she found a North Korean soldier hiding in the basement of her hospital, shivering and covering himself with the winter coat that she had left there during her shift. And then that other time she saw the ghost of her fiancé whom she had left in the North, coming to take her life and calling her “Hayashi,” the Japanese pronunciation of her surname that she was forced to go by in her youth. I couldn’t always tell the boundaries of what was “real” or fictionalized in those stories. That’s perhaps why I love her stories so much. I didn’t have superhero stories. I had Halmoni stories.

Halmoni’s mythical status from her stories was only heightened by her eccentric personality and strange mannerisms. For one, she was a hoarder. *Big time*. During holiday visits, my family usually asked me to get Halmoni from her room for a meal. When I opened the door to her room, I would find her practically *buried* by her things. She looked like a pawn shop owner, although the difference was that she was sitting on top of her things rather than displaying them in glass cases. Staring into her TV in the midst of her collection of random objects, she looked tiny and fearful to me. When Halmoni passed, Umma found the most questionable things (that she would not name) not only in the open spaces of her room but also in hidden places, behind and under her furniture. Halmoni used to go through people’s garbage bags outside and collect whatever it was that she deemed too valuable to throw away; her neighbors often complained about her. Umma used to get terribly angry at her mother. In Elaine Hsieh Chou’s *Disorientation*, the narrator of the story describes hoarding as “an immigrant’s tic” (108), never letting go of the things from their old world and the new one as a way of survival. My halmoni, too, couldn’t let go of many things and we, her children and grandchildren who

were the natives of the south, never really understood why. Living so far away from home now, *I see her*. I see the necessity for her compulsion in myself as an immigrant. When your life is saturated by so much losing, leaving, and lacking what used to make you feel at home, you try to overcompensate by acquiring, adopting, and accumulating the things that will make you forget about the absence. As if they can fill the void. As if the new can replace the old. As if they can compensate your yearning. Like the mug my umma bought for me before she left this world. Because it was too pretty. Because it was yellow, my favorite color. Because it reminded her of me. It was her parting gift for me. It sits in the deepest corner of my cupboard, unused. Because it's too important. Because it reminds me of her. Because she had to go and I couldn't stop her from leaving, I can't let this mug break. So, it will stay with me. Forever.

For another, Halmoni spoke like no one else I knew. Her North Korean accent was at times incomprehensible. She sounded different from everyone in the family because she left all her siblings, cousins, friends, and parents back in the North, never to meet them again. Having been raised during the time of the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), she had the vocabulary of another world. She was always like an alien to me. Among us—her children and grandchildren—she was the only one of her kind. However, when I first immigrated to the U.S. and started to make a home in this new and violently beautiful country, it was as if Halmoni's stories became translated into a language that I could finally understand. Her language, her "fugitive tongue," as Cathy Park Hong would describe it (97), was *Otherness* and it was embedded deep in my blood as my heritage. Her language gave me the tool with which I could express my own life as an immigrant.

These are just a few details of her portrait as a complex person that I have known, and most of what I know about Halmoni's life stories was retold to me by Umma, who was a firm believer in the generational cycle. She constantly looked for ways to read meaning into our family stories. She thought it was inevitable for me to move so far away from everyone in Korea because leaving everyone behind was what she did for herself when she was young. Umma left her countryside home in the mountains of Gangwon-do and headed to the city of Seoul by herself to find a job when she was only a teenager. Before me, it was umma. Before umma, it was Halmoni. Our repeating cycle of looking for faraway places for a better life, or, perhaps, Umma's *interpretation* of our uprooting tendencies, feels to me like a *reincarnation*. As we leave our family and home behind, we pass the memories of migration to the next body of our kin, so that our story recycles and continues into the next chapter in the next location. Same content, different form. Different generations, same story.

Our embodiments carry on as inevitably as our stories. 너는 웃는게 꼭 네 외할머니 같아. *You have the exact laughter of your grandmother*, my appa likes to say, for halmoni used to have an explosive laugh, just like mine. He also says I've inherited her personality, especially her masculinity. To him, these are compliments. He admired her dearly, and he admires me for taking after her unusualness. Her queerness, perhaps, might be a better suited word to describe her. To describe *us*.

I realized as I ruminated on the memories of Halmoni and kept writing her stories that I relished thinking about myself *as* my halmoni. While I strove to find connections to her with our migrant identities and gender non-conforming traits, I learned that it wasn't so much about our commonalities; it was much more about how I yearned to find more of who *I* was in *her*: in my roots.

Getting to know more about Halmoni, to me, meant getting to know more about my own undiscovered truths. Writing provided a platform for my self-construction and exploration of identity.

Many creative writers and creative writing educators of color have engaged actively with discussions about the significance of identity in narrative craft. The Japanese American writer and literary critic David Mura argues that “if writing is a search for language, it is also a search for identity. We write to articulate who we are, to describe our sense of the world” (11). Mura further comments that “the exploration of identity, whether in memoir or fiction, has become a central theme of our age, a theme far more complicated and layered than many realize” (6). In the twenty-first century, the concept of identity has gotten more contested and complicated than ever as communities, institutions, and nations across the globe strive to decolonize their cultural discourses and become more inclusive and equitable. Due to this constant shifting in contemporary culture, identity—as a narrative subject—has become even more integral to any form of creative writing. Echoing Mura’s claim, Korean American writer and creative writing educator Matthew Salesses suggests, “To really engage with craft is to engage with how we know each other. Craft is inseparable from identity. Craft does not exist outside of society, outside of culture, outside of power. In the world we live in, and write in, craft must reckon with the implications of our expectations for what stories should be, with what our ideas really mean” (30). What I find illuminating about Salesses’ point about identity in craft is that he sheds light on the *relational* aspect of identity. As fraught as the idea of identity “in isolation” is, the idea of craft existing in isolation from culture and its ideologies is also impossible because our writing, as well as our identities, are implicated in cultural expectations and identity politics. However, this discussion,

of course, can never be fully settled as our culture continues the evolving discourse on identity. Writer Janelle Adsit and social justice educator Renee M. Byrd state, “In the wake of much-circulated essays by writers ... creative writing has been called to account for its understanding of identity. The critical conversation about creative writing is growing, and with it the awareness of the identity politics at work in the creative writing workshop” (5). In writing practices, classrooms, and in both private and public discussions of narrative craft, the subject of identity and its complexity is still growing and evolving.

In an effort to contribute to this conversation about the critical connection between identity and craft, I argue that, to Asian American writers, other writers of color, and writers of Othered communities (women, LGBTQIA2+, disability, etc.), constructing our identity *in the context of our community* is fundamental to our narrative craft, and finding who we are in our community is especially salient in order for us to write our stories *against* master narratives, and more important, to help us identify the narrative conventions that truly serve and illuminate our stories. In other words, narrative conventions serve our form and illuminate our content.

In the next section, I therefore explore how contemporary writers and writing educators have reflected and contested the subject of identity and cultural tradition so as to lay the foundation for both my theoretical argument and my close reading of a Korean American narrative for youth, Tae Keller’s *When You Trap a Tiger*.

Identity, Tradition, and Counternarratives

Chinese American writer and public speaker Gish Jen writes in the introduction to *Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, and the Interdependent Self*: “I knew that despite thirty years of writing novels, stories, and articles, there was something in my bones I had not quite managed to articulate—a special way in which my cultural background was profoundly at odds with the literary culture I negotiated every day” (ix). Being born and raised in the U.S. as a second-generation Chinese American, Jen recognizes the mixed cultural roots of the East and the West that she embodies at the same time, identifying herself as one of the “changelings” who are able to tap into both cultures “as situation warrants,” and also as one of the “connoisseurs of a certain dissonance, too” (4). In this sense, Jen’s mixed cultural identity gives her a vantage point from which she can critically engage with two very different value systems while she theorizes and writes. However, as Jen suggests, her cultural background that involved a Chinese upbringing often clashed with U.S. literary culture (that is predominantly White, as I understand it); this conflict motivated Jen to explore further the subject of craft in connection with identity.

The most decolonizing aspect of Jen’s work in *Tiger Writing* is how she explores the narrative pattern of Chinese culture informed by the collectivist, interdependent self-construal that is native to the East, and how she challenges the limited scope in which we, in U.S. culture, understand what is and isn’t considered a normative narrative structure. Examining her father’s autobiography, Jen introduces the ways in which he completely negates her literary expectations of what an autobiography *should be*. Instead of giving details of his own story as an individual, Jen’s father constructs a narrative

that is “un-self-centered,” writing in a “true interdependent style” (11) by describing at length, his “context”: the family genealogy, the family house, and “the power structure of his world as it was inscribed in its architecture” (26). While this way of telling one’s life story may seem unusual given the dominant cultural expectations of individualistic self-narratives in the U.S., a deeper exploration of cultural specificity reveals much about not only how we tell our stories but also how we interpret the stories in this culture when they are written by individuals with minoritized backgrounds. Employing the metaphor of a Chinese tea pot that gains more flavor over time, Jen unpacks her father’s interdependent self-construal and writing style in which he views himself *a part* of a bigger picture. She argues, “[t]his idea of a prized quality that can only be achieved by slow accumulation over time is, by the way, characteristically Chinese, as is the interdependent suggestion that while the individual pot of tea is less than a be-all and end-all, it gains complexity and subtlety from the pots that preceded it and enriches the pots that follow” (20). As beautiful as the metaphor is, Jen’s explanation about the cultural root of her father’s writing and tradition is expansively enlightening as to the subject of how one’s identity and culture are deeply entwined with their narrative craft. What Jen recognizes her father’s writing is in the narrative tradition of the East in which the “collectivist self....stresses commonality, defines itself via its place, roles, loyalties, and duties, and tends to see things *in context*” (7, italics added). In the East Asian tradition, the writer utilizes this interdependent storytelling to construct the identity that coheres to their community.

This narrative tradition informed by the distinct self-construal of the East can be found in other Asian American narratives as well, since the collectivist ideology is common among other Asian

cultures. Additionally, this may also not be an ideology only with Asian narratives, as it also appears in other minoritized narratives. Jen challenges the concept of the simplistic East/West binary when she refers to psychologist Richard Nisbett's work, stating that "the difference in self typically thought of as East-West" is now considered "'West and the rest'—with 'the west' here referring to Europe and North America, and 'the rest' referring to the rest of the world" thanks to globalization and modernization "now bringing to 'the rest' a veritable epidemic of individualism" (4).

Indeed, the polarizing effect of capitalist globalization that fuels multiple systems of oppression across nations has been acknowledged by other literary scholars (see, for example, the Warwick Research Collective's *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*). Accelerating modernization works constantly to silence and erase diverse narrative traditions across the globe.

However, some contemporary writers and creative writing educators have put forth consistent efforts to rediscover and reclaim Othered narratives and to decolonize ideas about *what it means* to tell our stories and *in what way*. Salesses is a good example. Salesses argues, "There is no universal standard of craft—this can't be emphasized enough" (101). Further, he calls our attention to the necessity of critically engaging one's craft: "As writers we need to know that there are many different conventions—not just convention and experimentation—and we need to know where those conventions come from, and whom they serve, in order to know what and why and how to mean" (xix). Salesses is especially productive when he suggests ways to deconstruct the concept of "writing conventions" and pushes writers to see the positionalities that are involved in the making, using, and

normalizing of our writing practices. To further demonstrate his point, Salesses also explores the ways East Asian and Asian American literature have been misunderstood by White scholars because of their lack of knowledge about the narrative traditions of Asian cultures. Salesses challenges this misconception on the basis of his research on East Asian and Asian American narrative traditions. In the case of Asian American literature, he argues:

[S]ay for instance that an Asian American writer wanted to counter the stories told about her, about her identity, about her parents' identities, about her place in historical narrative.... In the tradition of Asian American literature, resistance is a part of the canon....and novels....regularly explore the question of what is "real" vs. "what is the movies"; disrupt authorial authenticity and/or presence; include other narrators with conflicting points of view; make the fantastic part of the everyday world; contain intertextuality; offer unofficial stories as primary sources of information; distrust official narratives, etc. (106-07)

Although Salesses believes that East Asian and Asian American literatures display different sets of narrative traditions when compared to the dominant narratives of White, cismale, straight, middle-class, temporarily able-bodied, etc., he insists that nondominant narratives should not be Othered by the dominant culture. He emphasizes, "Writing that follows nondominant cultural standards is often treated as if it is 'breaking the rules,' but why one set of rules and not another? What is official always has to do with power" (7). A nondominant writing tradition is frequently Othered in the world of narrative craft—not unlike how the *people* of nondominant cultural groups are treated—so unveiling the system of power that circulates in the narrative culture to control how we tell and understand

stories is becoming an ethically urgent matter to which many creative writers of color are calling our attention.

Like East Asian and Asian American literature, Latin American literature is known to contest the boundaries between reality and magic. However, the notion between what is “real” or not is also culturally constructed. Salesses explains how the Argentine writer Julio Cortazar’s writing is often considered as magical realism but the writer himself “categorizes his own and other ‘fantastic’ stories as simply more inclusive realities” and says that one of those stories simply “represents a real experience of time in which, like a daydream, it becomes impossible to tell what is real and what is not” (25-26). As Salesses emphasizes, “Craft is never neutral. Craft is the cure or injury that can be done in our shared world when it isn’t acknowledged that there are different ways that world is felt” (22).

Othered stories of our culture can also be understood with the terms *counterstorytelling* or *counternarratives*. Introduced by Critical Race Theory scholars Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *counterstorytelling* is a “[w]riting that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by majority” (159). Similarly, Adsit and Byrd explain the definition of *counternarratives*:

Counternarratives are not necessarily narratives that refute, point-to-point, dominant ideas by constructing antithetical stories. Instead, counternarratives break open dominant narratives, exposing them for what they are: contingent stories that serve some at the expense of more. Some counternarratives are forms of countermemory, or stories that transform history through suppressed or subjugated knowledge.... The counternarratives may do this by speaking

to experiences that are left outside of the master narrative, offering epistemologies that are occluded or castigated by what is dominant. Counternarratives are a way of countering epistemic injustice, therefore,...[t]he counternarrative insists upon the question “who does it serve?” (77)

The key point in both *counterstorytelling* and *counternarratives* is acknowledging that the construction of stories can work to uncover the face of hidden realities that minoritized communities inhabit in an effort to counter the oppressive ideologies of dominant cultures. As a result, we as individual writers can resist injustices by speaking our truth: our subjugated knowledges. Explaining Michel Foucault’s term, “subjugated knowledges,” and resisting the scriptocentric culture of the dominant power, anthropologist and ethnographer Dwight Conquergood claims that “[s]ubjugated knowledges have been erased because they are illegible; they exist, by and large, as active bodies of meaning, outside of books, eluding the forces of inscription that would make them legible, and thereby legitimate” (146). Further he adds, “Subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted” (146). Many minoritized communities’ writings contain testimonies of a reality that expose the violence of the status quo. However, speaking about these realities isn’t always safe for many. Although Conquergood argues that Others may not have the privilege to afford clarity, I would offer the following challenge: what each community views as a clear and direct communication may come in many different forms, as Jen and Salesses argue. Other times, minoritized communities also make use of cryptic languages that can only resonate with the members of their own community so as to avoid the scrutinizing eyes of the status quo. But surely,

the lack of access to a level playing field, as Conquergood points out, is a substantial factor that hinders Othered peoples from speaking truths, being heard, so our stories will be included in written platforms. After all, those whose stories get published are implicated in political power. Writer and educator Joseph Harrington writes that the “job of the archivist is not only to prevent documents from leaving the archive, but perhaps more importantly, to keep out those that don’t belong there. This is, of course, a political decision that involves repression and destruction, even as it involves preservation” (4). Who decides whose stories should be told? Who benefits from the dominant narrative that is selected by those publishers who maintain the status quo? Whose stories are repressed and destroyed, and which stories are preserved? Exploring the positionalities that are involved in narrative culture can reveal the fact that unequal distributions of power control the stories of any culture, just as those inequalities control the lives of individuals and communities. This narrative injustice is challenged and disempowered when we, as writers and critics, consider deeply the ways in which we choose to tell our stories and when we interrogate the ways in which we as critics read and understand diverse communities’ stories.

As an example of my argument about the relationship between identity and craft in this section, I now turn to Tae Keller’s *When You Trap a Tiger*.

Embracing Magic, Tiger, and Other Dangers

Tae Keller is a Korean American author who grew up in Honolulu, Hawaii. She won the John Newbery Medal, as well as the Asian Pacific American Literature Award, with her 2020 book, *When You Trap a Tiger*. Her lineage as a prolific writer stems from her mother Nora Okja Keller, who won

the Pushcart Prize with her work in *Comfort Woman* and who wrote about many difficult subjects related to the Korean War. *When You Trap a Tiger* is an innovative narrative for youth that incorporates magical storytelling and Korean folktales to explore the subject of the Korean diaspora and a young girl's connection to her heritage during her process of growth. I argue that Keller's story makes effective uses of the narrative traditions that I've explored in the last section—contesting the boundaries between magic and reality, interdependent self-construal, and *counterstorytelling*—that enable the story to complicate and complement the subject of Korean American identity.

The story begins when a Korean American middle schooler, Lily Reeves from California, moves to Washington with her mother and her sister Sam during summer break to spend more time with her ailing halmoni. As soon as the narrative begins, a sense of magic disrupts the stability of the world in which Lily resides. As the family drives through a rainstorm on their way to Halmoni's house, Lily sees a tiger lying in the middle of the road. Because of this, Lily experiences extreme fear and confusion, especially when she realizes that she is the only one in her family who can see the tiger—except for one other person: Halmoni, who has always kept a close connection to Korean myths, rituals, and spirits. As the story continues, Lily realizes that the tiger has a long and complicated history with Halmoni. She learns that Halmoni stole stories from the tiger and hid them in her secret glass jars in the basement. Allured by the mystery of these stolen stories, Lily pursues the tiger to find out the truth. Upon their meeting, what turns out to be the magical *tigress* strikes a deal with Lily: if she can return the stories that Halmoni stole and hid away, Halmoni will be healed.

One of the narrative traditions that Keller's story embodies is the element of magic; I observe that its contesting of reality in Keller's narrative serves two functions. First, it provides the setting of instability for Lily that acts as a fissure through which enter alternative views of her world. Lily's story is ultimately about the process of loss and grief as she witnesses her halmoni's decline and eventual departure. The possibility of Halmoni departing from Lily's world itself is what shakes Lily to the core. The magic and its expansion of the world in mysteriously new ways provide an epistemological *opening* where Lily can learn to understand and accept the difficult part of life: the death of a person she loves. It's the collapse of her world from which she must rebuild herself. In the magical space where reality can manifest itself in many different forms, Lily can experiment with her ways of viewing the world and come to terms with the impending changes in her life that she must prepare for.

Second, magic offers an intimate connection between Lily and Halmoni, the two people who are able to cross back and forth between the magical and *nonmagical*. As a character, Halmoni is initially depicted as an eccentric person; the family can't relate to her. Lily says, "Halmoni is Halmoni. Weird is her normal" (79). Gradually, this changes as Lily finds a new connection to her through sharing experiences with magic. There are different reasons why Halmoni's family consider her to be idiosyncratic. For one thing, Halmoni often tells Lily and her sister "stories of impossible things" (35), and for another, Lily's mother is annoyed with her own mother's traditions, including her superstitious belief about moving things only on "auspicious days" (28) and doing *kosa*, which is a Korean ritual of offering food to spirits to keep them happy. It is clear that at least parts of her "weird" traits come from her Otherness as a first-generation immigrant. Unlike Lily, Sam, and their mother, all

of whom were born and raised in the States, Halmoni was born in Korea and immigrated to the U.S. when she was little. As many first-generation immigrants often do, Halmoni has kept the values and traditions from her old world, and this foreign, Othered way of being often leaves her family perplexed. Emphasizing her Otherness, Halmoni's speech integrates grammatical traits that sound different from Standard White English, but as Lily observes, "Sometimes I think she mixes up words on purpose, to make us laugh—to distract us" (47). Lily and her immediate family members interpret the common mannerisms of an immigrant that Halmoni embodies as offbeat tendencies that are unique to this one individual. To her family, Halmoni is an *Other*. However, through sharing magical experiences with her grandmother, Lily is able to connect with Halmoni on a deeper level and learn about her immigration stories that made her who she was. Unlike Lily's mother, who gets annoyed by Halmoni's traditions and her sister who keeps herself detached from her family, Lily is the only one in the family who displays enthusiasm and fondness for Halmoni's traditions and stories. To borrow Lugones' term again, both Halmoni and Lily are "world-travelers" (*Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, 77), the ones who travel between different cultures and the realms of multiple realities. Lily and Halmoni remain connected to their heritage as Koreans, which is mirrored in their ability to inhabit the world of magic.

Another narrative tradition in Keller's story is the interdependent self-construal that Gish Jen points out in *Tiger Writing*. In other words, Lily's connection to her halmoni and their heritage makes a meaningful contribution to Lily's identity formation. For example, in the beginning of the narrative, Lily describes herself as *invisible*. She explains, "teachers forget my name, and kids didn't ask me to play, and one time, at the end of fourth grade, a boy in my class frowned at me and said, *Where*

did you come from? I don't think I've ever seen you before" (1). As a student of color in the U.S., I can attest personally to feeling invisible, to teachers forgetting my name, to peers not including me, to being constantly questioned about my origin, and to being "forgettable," all of which are common feelings for an Other. And I know I am not alone in this testimony. Among others, children's literature scholar Sarah Park Dahlen also describes her feeling of being an Other by using the word "invisible" in the article "A Step from Heaven: On Being a Woman of Color in Children's Literature Studies," which I have referred to in a previous chapter (82).

What Lily describes as "invisibility" is not a simple individual quirk that comes from personality traits like shyness or introversion, but rather, it is a complex emotion of her own recognition of her Otherness. Lily also says, "I'm never difficult. I make things easy" (7). This statement about her selfhood resonates as the ways in which many Asian American girls and women internalize the model minority myth and repress themselves to stay meek and accommodating as a tool used to maintain White power. Observing Lily, her sister Sam criticizes Lily for being a "*QAG* ... Quiet Asian Girl. As in, a stereotype" (20). In the beginning of the narrative, Lily is presented as an Other, and this is the extent of Lily's own self-construal. However, this self-image changes dramatically in the story as she gradually embraces her heritage and empowers herself.

Within Korean heritage, the tiger is an important figure to our culture. It is one of the most commonly appearing figures in Korean myths and folktales, and the story of the tiger being connected to Korean culture goes all the way back to our foundation story of Gojoseon as a country. Korean people even think that the peninsula of Korea is in the shape of a roaring tiger. As far as I can

remember, all the Korean fairy tales I've heard in my childhood began as "When tigers smoked long pipes..." To Korean people, the tiger is often the creature that represents us, as the eagle does for many U.S. American citizens. Because of this cultural connection with the tiger, it is not surprising that Lily is able to empower herself as she engages with the tiger, and further, as she develops and can view herself *as* a tiger.

When Lily finds the jars that contain the stories that Halmoni stole away, she brings them to the tiger in exchange for Halmoni's health. And the stolen stories are about a girl who is half-tiger and half-human that delicately serves as a symbolism for the immigration story of Halmoni's mother and her descendants who inherit the same fate as the halfling. This halfling existence has a deeply resonating connotation that relates to the experiences of people with mixed cultural roots. Keller's narrative explains that it is about living in "two worlds," and having "friends and family in both forms," but not having anyone who understands one's "true heart" (151). The fact that the halfling existence gets inherited and repeated over generations also connects back to cultural identities, specifically a Korean culture with its symbolism of the tiger. The repeating nature of a generational cycle is also noted in the narrative when Lily says, "Halmoni ran away from Korea. Mom ran away from Halmoni. And now Sam's running away from all of us" (182-83). Like the way I followed suit in my own family's flights, the women in Lily's family also inherit the rituals of their escape. However, the narrative doesn't present the inheritance as a negative thing. As Lily engages with the magical tiger and learns more about the story that Halmoni has kept hidden, her vision of herself transforms from invisibility into *integrity*. Wanting to become more like her halmoni, who used her cunning against the

tiger, Lily claims, “I won’t be afraid. Halmoni faced tigers once, and now I will, too. I am Lily, and I am brave. I am my halmoni’s granddaughter” (145). As if Halmoni knew all along the qualities that Lily had inherited from her, Halmoni calls Lily the “little mini-me” (240). Toward the end of the narrative, Lily imagines the new vision of herself reflected in her sister’s eyes and thinks to herself, “Not a QAG anymore, but what? A wild girl, maybe. Half tiger” (249). Lily’s self-construal, which is empowered by the figure of tiger and her relationship to her halmoni, is profoundly interactive, interpersonal, and interdependent. Lily develops her identity through the loving relationship that she cherishes with Halmoni; this also helps Lily locate her place in Korean culture. As a Korean American, it is integral to the story that Lily understands the history of her family and her culture before she can truly embrace her selfhood and tap into her own empowerment.

The last narrative tradition in Keller’s story that I want to discuss is *counterstorytelling*. As Keller’s story is about the story *itself*, it deeply interrogates the subject of power that is associated with telling stories of oneself and community. For example, when Halmoni is nearing her death, she confesses to Lily that she stole and hid the stories from the tiger because the stories made her sad. Hearing this, however, Lily chooses to lean into those sad stories.

“Lily, when I tell my story, I am sad. So much of our family story is sad. And more than that: so much of Korean people story is sad. Long, long ago, Japan and United States people do wrong things to our country. But I don’t want to give you sad, angry stories. I don’t want to pass you those bad feelings.” Listening to her talk, I realize there is so much of the world that I don’t know. So much of my history, and so much of me. But I will learn it. (241)

Halmoni's speech reveals that, as much as she has kept her painful family history hidden, she has also kept quiet about the larger history of her people and her country because facing those stories has given her negative feelings. However, Halmoni's confession also reveals to the implied reader that there are stories about Korea and its people that are hidden and silenced because the dominant culture tends to hide away certain histories from the collective memory, not only because they make people sad, but also because that silencing is instrumental for the dominant culture to uphold its power. The truths about the Japanese occupation of Korea and its byproducts—such as human experiments, slavery, and sexual slaves—are neglected and silenced in Japanese education and media. Moreover, the United States' political power-struggle against the Soviet Union, which split our country in half, and with its military occupation that supported a dictatorship who usurped power in South Korea, are often the nuance missing in historical accounts of the Korean War (also known as “the Forgotten War,” especially in the U.S). In the master narrative of the United States's war stories, the U.S. is often described as the savior that protected South Korea from the spread of communism. However, what Halmoni has kept hidden away for years and finally tells Lily on her deathbed is the *counterstory* that reveals other occluded experiences, so her counter-dominant storytelling acts as an agent fighting against epistemic injustice. Although Halmoni has hidden these *counternarratives* from her family, the fact that she finally shares her past with Lily—who takes after her—foregrounds *counterstorytelling*. Soon, Lily learns that denying one's identity by hiding part of themselves is not the right way to *be*, especially after the tiger says, “The tiger-girl was wrong, Lily. As it turns out, she quite likes her tiger form. And she knows, now, that you can be more than one thing. If you are strong, you can hold more than one truth in your heart....And when you face your whole story, you can understand your whole

heart” (267). What the tiger teaches Lily is the invaluable lesson that keeping one’s truths hidden also keeps one from living with their whole heart. And living without one’s whole heart is truly an agonizing thing because separating oneself from “bad feelings” (240) as Halmoni describes it, makes us numb to other feelings that are indispensably wonderful, like love. Not unlike the connection I shared with my own halmoni formed around our histories that include both negative and positive emotions, Lily’s halmoni, too, acknowledges the pitfalls of hiding her stories and parts of herself away. She says:

“All my life, I spend *so* much time, *so* much energy, hiding my heart. I am scare of tigers. But more, I am scare of the tiger in me,” she says. “I thought I have to hide my words, because my English not so good. I thought I have to hide my heart, because I feel too much. And I thought I have to hide my story, because I think if I tell it, it is who I am forever....But when I keep it tight-tight, it eat me up. I don’t see the love, all around me.” (270, italics in the original)

The vital part about *counterstorytelling* that Keller illuminates here is that *counterstorytelling* is a ritual of *a community*. It is made of narratives told by multiple agents and over generations of people. It is interdependent community work. Although Halmoni departs from this world, she passes on her *counterstory*, her important truths to her granddaughter who will continue the stories of her family and her people. In turn, Halmoni’s stories impact and alter Lily’s identity as she changes her own narrative about who she is as a person. Lily affirms, “Because of Halmoni, I can be brave. I can be anything. I am a girl who sees invisible things, but I am not invisible” (287). Lily’s evolution as a person is a true *counterstory* of a Korean American identity.

Conclusion

When Mura discusses the reason why he writes, he states: “I decided that I was not only writing for myself but for certain readers, particularly other Asian Americans, who saw the same things I did and wanted reassurance that they were not crazy” (20). In a similar way, Cathy Park Hong also talks about her intended audience for her book *Minor Feelings* and how recognizing the presence of her audience contributes to the purpose of her writing. Hong explains that, at a reading during which she read one of her essays, a few students of color approached her after the reading and told her how much they appreciated it. As she writes, “Among them, a Korean American student said how alone and alienated she felt on campus. She asked if she could hug me. When I hugged her, she began sobbing. It is for her, I thought, that I’m writing this book” (30). When we write about our stories and the histories of our communities, perhaps we write not only for ourselves but also for each other. To be there for people like us and to tell them: *I see you*. Like storytelling, identity is individual *and* communal at the same time. Would there be a story of me without my halmoni? Would I be able to find the purpose of my storytelling without the “us”? I seem to be incapable of staying away from where I came from. However far I travel, I go back to my roots. I return to *us*. I’m home.

CHAPTER IV: LOVING COMMUNITY OF LEARNING: NOTES FROM A SEMESTER OF
TEACHING TOWARD EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

It is my belief that when we value others for their uniqueness and differences,
then we enhance the possibilities for our children and ourselves.

To me, that is what community is truly all about—when it is practiced and realized
in our daily lives with those we love and with those we have been taught to fear.

—Lee Mun Wah

There can be no love without justice.

—bell hooks

Around the time I began my teaching internship in the fall of 2021 as a third-year Ph.D. student, I was in a place of deep estrangement from my education. My master's program had its ups and downs, but it wasn't until the first semester of the Ph.D. program that I began to feel that academia wasn't made for people like me and that certain bodies were not welcome in its buildings, no matter how many "Everyone is welcome" posters and other pro-diversity signs were hung on the doors of department offices. There was a time when I used to believe in the face value of such things—that people *were* as welcoming as they make themselves appear, and that the liberal political stance alone *could* make an impact to create an environment where all students can learn and grow as equals.

Gradually, during my Ph.D. education, though, I realized that the problem of equity in education was

much larger, deeper, and more complex, and under multiple systems of domination, and that it takes much more than posters and political correctness for justice to happen or equality to be achieved. They weren't enough. Far from enough. And I felt that academia wasn't doing enough to give me the education I deserved.

Many questions started to occupy my mind then. Questions like: *Why are most of my professors and peers White and why do my classes cover course materials written by mostly White authors? When issues of racialization and racism come up, why do professors either barely touch on the subject to brush it off hurriedly, or even dismiss the conversation entirely? Why are students of color always sitting quietly in the corners? Who's, what's silencing us? Who's speaking out loud all the time and what enables and empowers them? How are systems of oppression operating in classrooms and how are they keeping us in check?* These nagging questions weren't just ringing inside me. I spoke about them out loud in classes I took, and I wrote about them in my term papers. This speaking-out, *speaking-up*, of course, wasn't received well at a predominantly white institution (PWI) where power circulates unevenly. It wasn't received well by my White peers and professors—they started treating me differently. It was as if speaking about the problem made *me* the problem. I could feel with all my senses that my body wasn't—in reality—welcome.

Then I realized that there was a specific place in academia that I was expected to occupy. There was a particular performance that I was expected to fulfil. I realized—then and there—that I was a person of color in White academia, and I truly understood what it entailed. The rules of racialization were applied strictly here just like in the world outside. The questions I previously had in mind were answered by uncomfortable glances, aggressive comments, outwardly obvious and sly putdowns, and

social ousting at a PWI: *Stay quiet. Assimilate. Conform. Help White people thrive. Don't make a problem, don't be a problem. Be pleased. Be unnoticeable. Be the background.* I'm reminded of Sara Ahmed's words when she states, "It is certainly the case that responsibility for diversity and equality is unevenly distributed. It is also the case that the distribution of this work is political: if diversity and equality work is less valued by organizations, then to become responsible for this work can mean to inhabit institutional spaces that are also less valued" (*On Being Included*, 4).

The gap between reality and what I understood as an ideal learning environment in my mind was so enormous that I found my whole education irrevocably alienating. The most disorienting aspect of it was that I was there all along—in the margins—since day one. I just didn't know the place I occupied until I was made aware of it. By the gradual, collective, and ongoing experience of being a student of color at a PWI, I learned that I wasn't meant to exist in the center by its systemic design. It's the way systems of disenfranchisement work. They blindfold us in the process to make sure that the strategies of dispossession are difficult to untangle. Sometimes, however, people of color get to untie the blindfold and find out where we truly are. And then, we can't unsee what's already been seen. It's *everywhere*. The wounds, too, begin to show everywhere. There's no going back. And we can't look away either.

The interesting part about a Ph.D. education is that, in many programs, graduate students teach where they also learn as students. The student/teacher identities are interwoven together, and this is a unique part of being a graduate student. And because I was supposed to teach where I was experiencing inequity as a graduate student, I started to imagine undergraduate students at the institution having similar experiences in their own education. All of them: the students that I've taught

before, that I'm teaching now, and that I'll teach in the future. I started to wonder if I, as a teacher, ever reinscribe the inequity perpetuating the trauma in my classrooms, because trauma is all that I've learned in academia. But was that really true? *Is trauma really all I've ever learned here?* I wondered. As much as trauma, violence, hostility, neglect, alienation, and all the harmful things were present in my education, I've also found things that nourished and nurtured me—healing, kindness, warmth, care, and the sense of community from friends and professors who have been there for me all along, supporting me, caring for me, respecting me, fighting against injustice with me, and most importantly, *believing me. Could I become that teacher for the students in my classrooms? How?*

I started to wonder, then, what it would take for me to orient my courses *against* the systems of domination in my classrooms, and instead move *toward* equity and justice. I wondered what it would take to be an educator who resists the urge to cling to authority, power, and control, and instead responds to the call to human connection, compassion, and empathy in each classroom space.

While I couldn't stop experiencing inequity in my own education as a student, I didn't want to perpetuate inequity and harm in my classroom where I was the teacher, the one who holds the most power to control and mediate the given social situation and where there is distinct power imbalance in the group, predicated on their identities. When I taught as a teacher, I wanted to embrace the lessons I had learned as a student. I wanted to do my best to correct the inequitable examples set in the courses I took, and I wanted to replicate the positive interactions and strategies I've learned from the educators who were genuinely invested in the growth and safety of all students. I knew I wouldn't be able to eradicate systemic injustice in education in one day, one semester, one academic year, but I wanted to

make a shift in my praxis and become more conscious about the ways I work toward equity while teaching.

In this chapter, I aim to illustrate that specific teaching experience of mine—a semester of teaching toward equity and social justice. Teaching a general education English course with college students of mixed backgrounds, identities, and academic careers, I made considerations, choices, actions, and interactions to disrupt conventional power dynamics in too many college classrooms and create a learning environment where equity and social justice are at the center of our community goals. There's a particular word of importance that I gravitated toward consistently during the semester while trying to achieve those goals. *Love*.

Planning a Community of Love

What does “love” mean in the context of education? Although it might be surprising for some to hear, I often sign off my professional emails with the word “love” to colleagues and professors that I have meaningful, consistent, and fulfilling academic relationships with. And oftentimes, they reciprocate the word back to me—“love”—signing off and reflecting back what the word “love” contains. I relish thinking about how we exchange digital “love letters” with each other in our everyday academic lives even though violence relentlessly grabs hold of our bodies. And I want to make it clear that when I say and receive the word, “love,” in this context, I don't think about “love” as in “romantic love.” To explain the context of love here, I borrow the words of bell hooks from her illuminating book, *All About Love* (2001). In the chapter, “Clarity: Give Love Words,” bell hooks explains there are multiple aspects of love that one needs to enact in order to truly embrace the concept. hooks states,

“To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication” (*All About*, 5). To hooks, love isn’t present only within romantic relationships. It is the foundation of many kinds of social dynamics that aim to “nurture our own and another’s spiritual growth” (6). To me, “academic love” is exactly that—it is the equal enactments of care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, and honest and open communication between individuals who strive to nurture our communal growth through the process. These enactments are truly present and ongoing in many of my academic relations in ways that have been nurturing to my growth as a scholar and person over the years in graduate school. And I always strive to nurture the growth of others in return, showing up for them with love and *to* their generous love I’ve received.

When I started planning my course before the semester began, it was important to me to truly embrace, embody, and emanate this concept—love—to make classrooms a space where we grow as students, teachers (in the future or at present), and individuals who are valuable parts of our society and culture. Considering this concept of love, planning a course meant that I needed to facilitate the ways in which “a loving community of learning” could form within its dynamic social group. This community would be a place where its members make sincere efforts to recognize each other’s different realities, enact and sustain genuine respect, commit to learn, and persist in our endeavors while learning from our mistakes, misconceptions, and possible conflicts. A community where we open ourselves to have honest communications with each other throughout and harbor care and express affection toward each other as equal human beings—*a community of love*.

For this task, there were three different categories I found vitally important to investigate and interrupt my course syllabus *before* meeting the students: 1) course materials; 2) assessment methods; and 3) “Safe Space Commitments” (which I’ll explain further in this section shortly). I will explain the reasons why these features were crucial to my effort to work toward making more equitable classrooms.

When I selected course materials for ENG 125: Literary Narratives (the course about which I’m writing, which is an introductory course to literary studies), incorporating diverse primary and secondary texts that center and amplify the voices of many marginalized communities, such as BIPOC, LGBTQIA2+, multi-generation immigrants, and disabled bodies, was the very basic first step. Looking back on my own education as a student, I rarely had courses where the learning materials truthfully represented my positionalities in the AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) communities, nonbinary bodies, disabled bodies, and immigrants. I didn’t want my students to feel that they weren’t a valuable part of the class, or to lack access to materials from communities other than their own. In other words, I needed to find texts that center protagonists from diverse marginalized communities in the narrative, while the narratives also do the equitable work of illustrating the characters’ complex realities without generalizing, stereotyping, or tokenizing them. Thus, I prioritized the works of authors who write about their own firsthand experiences from the communities (for example, Korean American authors writing about Korean American culture), or, when selecting authors who talk about other communities’ experiences, I ensured they knew their own positionalities and intentionally investigated the epistemic gaps in their understanding about the realities experienced by those bodies that are not their own. And this still meant that there was a large pool of texts to choose from.

However, there were several more steps that I needed to take in order to select the materials that would help orient my course much closer toward equity. The second step was to investigate the thematic subjects of each text and select those that address social, political, and cultural conflicts (i.e., any kind of power-based issues) that would make relevant connections to the students' lived realities in the classrooms, rather than simply highlighting the protagonists from minoritized cultures. For example, the texts I chose for ENG 125 carefully examined such issues in our culture. Jason Reynolds' *Long Way Down* addresses the issue of gun violence in youth as particularly pertinent to Black communities that are racially and economically disenfranchised. Erika L. Sanchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* discusses the issue of suicide and mental illness among youth that has deep connections to battle fatigue from racism, sexism, and multiple cultural identities and generation gaps between immigrant parents and their children that many Latinx communities experience daily. Cece Bell's graphic memoir *El Deafo* is another good example. As a deaf person, Bell illustrates the ways in which disabled communities are constantly forced to face ableist ideologies and bullying in our culture while struggling to find accessible environments that accommodate their embodiments with respect and care. These texts not only center the protagonists from minoritized communities, but they also examine deeply the socio-political issues that are significant to each community in the current political climate. I believed that these two concepts—centering protagonists living in Otherhoods and interrogating socio-political contexts—needed to be strongly tied to each other in the texts, representing and amplifying social justice issues with nuanced care.

Last, the third step I needed to make while selecting the materials was to examine the narratives' ideological goals toward equity and justice. The questions I considered while examining the texts were:

- 1) Does this text resist the ideologies of systemic violence, or does it stay silent about the issues at stake?
- 2) Does this text work to uplift and empower minoritized communities, or to simply illustrate victimhood as a top-down approach of coloniality and perpetually put the marginalized individuals in a place of pity and otherness?
- 3) Does this text—while talking about social issues—recenter Whiteness by using tropes like the White Savior and the White Damsel in Distress, or in other ways make the justice issue all about White folks?
- 4) What is the text’s goal and what is its stance toward equity and justice?
- 5) What would we be able to achieve by reading this text together in the course?

A text may center a minority culture and highlight the sociopolitical issue pertinent to the community, but what does it do if its ideological grain fails to contribute to social justice in our culture? Selecting diverse texts for a syllabus may seem like a simple, straightforward task, like ticking off boxes, but in reality, the task deserves much complex, deliberate, and critical thinking in order to help a learning community deeply value diverse experiences while we learn.

It took a similar effort while choosing an assessment method that would contribute to making a more equitable learning environment. The assessment model that I adopted for ENG 125 was “Antiracist Labor-based Assessment” developed by a Rhetoric and Composition scholar, Asao B. Inoue. In his personal academic blog, Inoue explains this method by stating the following:

It is a grading system based on a set of social agreements that the class negotiates together.

The grading contract’s agreements come from initial discussions about how much labor or

work will constitute each final course grade possible. In labor-based grading systems, you, the student, get more control over what makes your final grade than in conventional systems, where a teacher's judgements of your writing dictate most of your grade. In labor-based systems, how your teacher feels about your work has no bearing on what course grade you get, but of course, it does have bearing on what you might learn or what you might do next in your writing. (Inoue)

What makes this labor-based assessment system antiracist or more equitable is that it interrogates and intervenes in the power dynamics between the teacher and the student, and in turn works to prevent any conscious/unconscious biases that may be present while the teacher assesses a student's work from diverse positionalities with different sets of value systems, intellectual rigors, heritage, and linguistic and otherwise cultural traditions. While a more conventional assessment model in college centers on the teacher's cultural background, value system, and other learned models of academic capabilities that will constitute their "authority," the labor-based model is more democratic in nature because it pushes the learning community to negotiate and create a rubric to which all participating learners can contribute and agree. However, the teacher's role as a mediator is crucial in this process.

Understanding that power often circulates unevenly in any given social situation, a teacher must stay mindful of the diverse positionalities of students in classrooms, negotiate accordingly, and disrupt the power dynamics among student participants when needed. If selecting diverse course materials was designed to value each individual in my classrooms by representation and opening dialogues of multiple sociopolitical issues, adopting the antiracist labor-based assessment model to

ENG 125 was meant to value each student by redistributing power and transferring ownership of the course to every participating member.

Along with learning materials and assessment methods, I also investigated a collection of syllabus elements that I call, “Safe Space Commitments.” These commitments consist of 1) Content Warnings; 2) Course “Codes of Conduct”; 3) and Accommodations. Classrooms are never politically neutral spaces and are thus filled with many possible harms and risks. Thinking back to my experiences as a student, violence and harm were almost always present in the courses I took. In my experience, there is a sense of consensus among my fellow classmates of color that it is often a traumatizing experience to be in a classroom where the subject of racism is discussed when the majority of students are White. When White students feel guilty as both participants and beneficiaries of White supremacy and systemic racism, White fragility¹¹ and White flammability¹² soon fill the air, suffocating the

¹¹ Writer Robin DiAngelo argues that, for White people, “[t]he smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses.... These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*” (2, italics in the original).

¹² Poet and cultural worker Sun Yung Shin challenges DiAngelo’s term white fragility in “It’s Not White Fragility, it’s White Flammability,” and proposes “flammability” to replace “fragility,” referring to White people’s tendency to easily become angry as if “waiting to catch in[t]o flames at the slightest provocation” (Shin).

students of color in the room. Soon enough, we can't breathe in the presence of intoxicating Whiteness. Remembering those experiences, I asked myself: *How do I prevent harm from happening in my classrooms where I teach? How do I protect my students from harm?* Then, I realized that my questions—despite my good intentions—were misguided. There is no way I can *prevent* violence from happening. There is no way I can *protect* my students with foolproof armor. Working toward equity as a teacher means that I needed to understand that classroom spaces consisted of diverse identities with many social dynamics and that I needed to give up the old ideas of control and domination, even if they come from good intentions. Soon, it became apparent to me that I was supposed to reconceptualize my role as a *savior* to my students. The students were—like me—people with real flesh and blood who go about their days in the world where systemic violence is always present, touching them, harming them, and dispossessing them. And I—also a person with real flesh and blood in the world—do not hold the power to completely halt systemic violence within my classroom spaces. I couldn't *save* them. What I needed to consider instead, I thought, was how I communicate with students that I commit myself to understanding the different realities and vulnerabilities that each student brings into our learning community, so that I can lay the foundation in which *trust* can grow between us. I needed to find ways to let them know they could find me as a resource and support for not only intellectual but also emotional needs that may arise during learning. To work toward this goal of building trust in a loving community of learning, I interrogated, intervened, and invented the writings of my syllabus in ways meant to affirm the real bodies that exist in this course.

With content warnings¹³ that I describe in detail for each course material, I committed to empathize with students' possible traumatic experiences from the past that may have a significant impact on their learning process. With this, I also iterate that I may not have the power to protect them from flashbacks, re-traumatization, and other negative experiences while interacting with the materials, but I encourage everyone to become actively conscious of the possible effects and how to respond to them, draw personal boundaries in terms of what they can and cannot physically do, and use communication as a coping tactic (with me or others they may find helpful) to help navigate the situation. Providing detailed content warnings is important, and communicating with students about understanding, respect, and trust should go hand-in-hand in order to make the course more accessible to everyone.

While content warnings are a common part of syllabus-writing that I adopted from other professors and colleagues, the "Course Code of Conduct (CCC)" is something I've developed for this particular course. For me, writing CCC was not only about drawing boundaries in terms of what I cannot tolerate in this learning space (such as microaggressions and other discriminatory behaviors) but also making the ideological statements that iterate and clarify my own political stance as a person. While some educators to this day still persist in believing that they can stay politically neutral while teaching, many recent interrogations of education made by scholars who study race and feminism (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*; Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy*; Valverde and Dariotis, *Fight the Tower*; Niemann,

¹³ Not "trigger" warning, which often has negative and even harmful connotations to BIPOC students with higher volume of experiences with gun violence.

Gutiérrez y Muhs, and González, *Presumed Incompetent II*) have affirmed that education is *never* apolitical. Acknowledging that teachers are not apolitical beings is the first step; making the ideological statements clear that I strive not to be neutral on social justice issues such as, racism, sexism, ableism, binary gender system, homophobia, and so on, is a further step that I took to build trust and initiate open and honest conversation about equity as a community of learners.

Writing the accommodation portion of my syllabus occurred, then, in the process of *reconceptualizing* and *rewriting* the pre-existing criteria for student access information. As the disability studies and rhetoric scholar Jay Timothy Dolmage claims in *Academic Ableism*, “the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness” (3). Student’s success in college classrooms depends highly on the student’s ability to align themselves with ableist notions of learning and performance. As a person who has always struggled with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and panic attacks, and who is also a sexual violence survivor, I myself have experienced that the kinds of resource and support that academia can provide to help me thrive in education fall awfully short, not to mention how the process of working with student access and accommodation is highly strenuous and inaccessible to most students. Rewriting the descriptions of accommodation for my course, then, meant that I must keep the possibilities and communication open for students with their individual needs for learning. What I’ve learned from disability studies as a graduate student is that disability is often invisible and also *made* invisible by ableist systems in our culture. Acknowledging that I may not be able to perceive each student’s needs in order to make my course as accessible as possible is important for me to become an informed teacher. At the same time, I

wanted the course to remain open and revisable to accommodate students in creative ways by communicating with students, and this was an action with an intent to orient against another strand of academic injustice in our culture.

In this section, I've examined and explained the ways in which I took deliberate steps toward planning a course that centers equity and social justice and my thought processes behind them. While I don't want my illustrations to be understood as a one-size-fits-all strategy to every teaching situation, I want to make a clear impression about how asking one's own questions toward planning a more equitable course, and more important, *staying* with the questions to be mindful of the choices and actions we make as teachers, is crucial. We are living in a culture where simple solutions, how-to-dos, and answers are more highlighted and welcomed than staying in the place of the unknown. Resisting this "culture of answers" has always been an intentional choice I make as a teacher and a scholar. What happens when we stop rushing to the answers? I believe that possibilities arise when we stay with the questions. Especially for teaching toward equity and social justice that demands educators to consistently observe and mediate the social dynamics in each teaching situation, I want to stress how important it is for teachers to practice mindfulness and in turn approach the issue of power in a complex and critical ways.

Forming, Nurturing, and Sustaining the Community

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), bell hooks asserts that "to build a community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice" (*Teaching,*

40). But what does it mean to *value* someone's voice? What does it look like? How does it feel? Lee Mun Wah speaks about this subject in his TedTalk, "The Secret to Changing the World." Lee claims:

I think this country has a huge mythology. And the mythology is that our differences are valued. I don't think so. I think they are *celebrated*. I think that if you really value someone's culture, you integrate it into your workplaces, even in today, in our businesses. It becomes part of the culture. You see, I'm much more than Bruce Lee. Much more than Chinese New Year. I want to let you know....that it's not what I have in common with White people that makes me significant, but rather my differences are beautiful, and that they are wonderful, and that this hair that I wear that my people had to cut off, and that this beautiful Tibetan shirt that I wear is part of my clothing, and not just a costume to be celebrated. That I want to tell you, that in the way I move, and that I express myself, is part of my people and my ancestors. (TedxTalks, italics and ellipses added)

What Lee implies when he points at the difference between celebrating and valuing individuals in our society is his rightful desire to be understood and treated as a full human being with complicated identity, emotions, families, and friends who love him, life memories, hopes and dreams, goals and purposes, history, traditions, and heritage; he is not just a simplified marker of the race or ethnicity that he represents. Reducing a person into a fragmented part is a symptom of systemic oppression—whether it is sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability, etc.—the master narrative dictates that a person equals a manifestation of an undesirable identity, a less-than, a non-human. Without the conscious decision to enact such a reduction, many teachers can perpetuate the abstraction of a human in classrooms when they treat students as the ambassadors of whatever cultures they are expected to represent. When

I sit in a classroom as a student, it is in my daily interactions with professors and classmates that I'm expected to speak about, and moreover, I'm expected to do the labor of explaining and even arguing about my experiences as a person of color. This expectation, of course, is always communicated to me with superficial and condescending gestures to "celebrate" my differences, although this effort leaves me feeling nothing but Othered and used for enlightening White people at best and providing outlets for White rage, fragility, and flammability most of the time. These interactions have been especially painful because, when it really came to talking about my differences and the harm that I received because of it, my peers and professors who were so eager to learn about Korean culture were no longer interested. They squirmed in their seats and couldn't meet my eyes. All I could feel was their discomfort and guilt facing my rage at injustice as a person of color.

Thinking back to these memories of where I was "celebrated" but not "valued" as a member of a learning community and beginning teaching the two sections of my ENG 125, I thought about the meaning of creating "loving community of learning" again. I realized there can be no love in an environment where people don't see each other as full human beings who have complex lives outside of the classroom. In the conventional setting of college education, though, is the classroom a space where people are encouraged to be full human beings, or are we expected to embody this single-dimensional "student" identity that entails romanticized images of professionalism, emotional detachments, and rigid boundaries from their personal lives in the pursuit of so-called "intellectual rigor" as inequitable as the phrase can be?

To me, this reality in the current education system signals that academia is a place designed to help systemic oppression thrive, rather than a space invested in the betterment of all human lives. In

such a learning environment, students exist in a perpetual harm of what Bettina Love calls “the educational survival complex,” one in which “students are left learning to merely survive, learning how schools mimic the world they live in, thus making schools a training site for a life of exhaustion” (30). I remember how difficult it has been for me to go to classes and engage in the recent few years because of the intensified hate crimes on Asian bodies during this ongoing time of the COVID-19 pandemic. I remember reading about Michelle Alyssa Go, an Asian American woman who was pushed into a running train while standing in front of a platform. I remember seeing a report about Christina Yuna Lee, another Asian woman who was followed into her apartment by a strange man who stabbed her to death. I remember watching video footage of an elderly Asian man, Vicha Ratanapakdee, being pushed on the street so hard that he flew in the sky until he landed on the concrete floor and passed away a few days later. And of course, hearing the news about the 2021 Atlanta Spa Shootings.

This national terrorism is, of course, not *new* to our people, unlike what some people believe. On those particular days that I heard about the tragedies, I couldn’t go to classes and pretend I was just “a student.” My whole body ached, and I felt shattered inside. And it was especially difficult to focus on learning because the learning environment forced me to check my identity at the door when I entered the classroom. Rarely did anybody acknowledge or even show awareness of the domestic terrorism that was going on in *and* outside of the ivory tower, and it was painful to pretend like these real-life events that are harming the bodies of my people were insignificant. I felt my insides tear up and liquify each time. Yet I had to pretend. *Yes. This reading is interesting. I care a lot about this theory. Yes. I did my homework. Let me prove it to you.*

And I understood that AAPI communities are not the only racial group who experience pain—it's everywhere, every day. The killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and so many others are just a handful of examples of how the White supremacist system enslaves and kills BIPOC in ways that devastate us every day, and this has been a reality persisting for over four hundred years in this country. Are students experiencing the pain of witnessing and also *living* these realities while we teach and learn? Absolutely, yes.

So, I asked myself: *How do I work toward building a loving community of learning where I encourage students not to check their identities and real-life experiences at the door? Instead, how do I help them actively and consciously use the knowledge informed by their identities to support their learning process without tokenizing students or otherwise reducing their personhood into the categories of their identities?* It seemed clear to me that trying to even get close to this goal had to include some teaching tactics that would help us create a sense of community in the classroom so we could communicate with each other about our life stories and also find some avenues on which we could investigate our personal narratives that involve emotions while also practicing mindfulness for processing all this information. For these tasks of forming, nurturing, and sustaining the loving community of learning, I developed and facilitated two in-class activities: 1) Entrance Stamp & Exit Ticket; and 2) The Writing Lab.

“Entrance Stamp & Exit Ticket” is a collective writing activity during which each member of the learning community (including me, the teacher) shares small aspects of our lives at the beginning of the class to discuss, followed by sharing their thoughts, ideas, and emotions relating back to our learning time together at the end of each class session. Many of these discussions lead to opening our

conversations to what's at the heart of our lives, often involving varied emotions from giggles of joy and amusement to the stillness of sadness and grief. I remember how one of my students talked about her excitement about going to an ice-skating rink over the weekend—and how proud she was when she got to brag about her skills of twirling, back-sliding, and jumping and landing on the ice, and the pure joy she radiated when she talked about her memories of learning ice skating as a child while she grew up. I also remember hearing about students whose family members were hospitalized because of COVID-19, or students who lost their loved ones during the pandemic. Sharing both the pain and the joy we faced every day and empathizing with each other in ways that allowed us to see each other as more complex human beings was an integral part of our community because the central goals of the course were focused on social justice. One of the most striking pieces of feedback that I've received from a student about this activity was that they thought the most memorable thing about our class was the fact that I “checked in” with them, and how no other professors offered that emotional space. In a way, hearing this was shocking. Why was it so rare for them to experience such a small act of kindness? In another way, I believed them when they talked about this emotional unavailability from professors. Later that academic year, I heard a White cis-male colleague talking about how teachers are not “therapists,” and how he is unwilling to have a “group therapy session” in a class where he would then be forced to work through students' traumas with them. He further added and advocated for—in the discussion of providing a safe environment for students, no less—the necessity of “discomfort” in the process of learning. Another colleague who is a Latina listened to this delusion and eloquently asked: “But where is the line between discomfort and harm?” He was silent. Too many teachers don't acknowledge their own fear of the emotional sensitivity much needed to teach human beings, and

instead use the rhetoric of what does and what doesn't count as pedagogical responsibilities. Much like many ideologies in our culture, pedagogical responsibilities are also socially constructed and informed by the educational systems of oppression that do not work to uplift and empower minoritized students with many collective traumas of living under systems of oppression. I remember hearing one of my White male professors dismiss the female professors in the department who harbor loving academic relationships with care and trust. He claimed, "They're trying to be mothers and I don't like that. We're supposed to be academics, not mothers." As sexist as this claim is (if women enact care with students, does that mean that the group is automatically put into fulfilling the social expectations of being mothers?), the speech also worked to shadow his emotional incapability with the ideological assumption that being an academic equals emotional detachment and a lack of love between individuals. However, many teachers from minoritized cultures—women, people of color, queer folx, disabled folx—understand from their heart that love is an important part of teaching: the audacity and pure badassery to keep on caring and loving amid forces that attempt to reduce us. This, to me, is a pedagogy of resistance.

The second in-class activity made a step further into building a community with the basis of love and acknowledging, integrating, and embodying our complex realities while learning as human beings. The "Writing Lab" was our second-day-of-the-week activity, when we'd write about our personal experiences in the genres of writing that we were learning about each week, and relating our experiences to the social justice subjects that we were discussing. At the end of the semester when I asked students to form a narrative about their learning process, many chose to speak about the Writing Lab. To showcase how this course facilitation touched on students in unique and personal ways, I cite

directly from a student's narrative with their permission. To keep students' identities confidential, I will call this student "Natalie."

I learned how important it is to take the time and reflect and listen to your own personal needs. Journaling for me allows me to reflect on just about anything I want to write about, whether it be memories, feelings/emotions, or trauma, ... Also, I have f[allen] in love with writing affirmations or reminders to help me through tough situations. This practice helps me so much because we have to learn how to be there for ourselves and this is another way that I am able to do that for myself. Journaling also helps me help other[s]. I can tell them about this new self-care skill that I have learned from my English class. I am able to share with them how it has helped me overcome some of my biggest internal issues.

During the semester, Natalie often discussed the struggles of being a woman of color in the world because she encountered anti-Blackness and sexism every day. Looking at Natalie's response to the course at the end of the semester, I'm invigorated by the ways in which she locates writing practices as a platform to focus her energy on her individual emotional needs by processing the memories and trauma she had experienced. Not only that, but I also appreciate the ways in which she recognizes these loving enactments to herself as a way to help others in turn, making what she learned available to others with whom she may empathize. Although not directly communicated in her writing, I see here how Natalie is pointing at the multiple course goals that our learning community worked to achieve during our semester that included the necessity of our healing journey and empathy for the struggle of bringing more social justice to our culture.

Another student, “Amy,” wrote more directly about the subject of healing while participating in the Writing Lab. Amy stated:

When we were allotted time during class to write our thoughts down on paper, I felt a sense of relief throughout my body. I appreciated that we were allowed to simply write, and we didn’t have to worry about perfecting our work. I have learned throughout the course of the semester that healing comes from slowing down and it is okay to process our emotions. I want to make an effort to take time every day to journal my thoughts down on paper. When writing my personal narrative, I spent a considerable amount of time self-reflecting on the past couple years of my life, and I was able to process my emotions.

In Amy’s response, I’m again being pulled toward the ways she valued her emotions while writing and taking the time to *stay* with those emotions by doing so. I see Amy’s ability to perceive emotions as the locus of freedom and healing. I’m especially drawn by the moment when Amy wrote, “throughout my body.” She also recognizes that writing is an *embodied* experience where the sense of relief from this healing moment of processing her emotions is felt through her body at the time and space she occupied.

Some students also found personal meaning-making when they engaged in writing activities that contributed to the bigger projects in the course. One of the students, “Sam,” identified herself as belonging to the LGBTQIA2+ community. Sam wrote, “I really wanted to cover topics that pertained to me and [in] my personal narrative, I opened up about my struggles growing up dressing in boys’ clothes and such and how people saw that and....I wanted to share about gender expression that it is okay to be who you are.” When students are given the freedom and respect to bring their personal lives

into the classroom space and make meaning while reflecting them and connecting them to the social justice issues in our culture in deep, engaging ways, they are able to find many ways not only to learn through them, but also to locate their powers to heal themselves and further, empower the communities around them. Talking about their relationship to power at the end of the semester, one of the students in class noted, “I am able to walk away feeling more confident in having the ability to make a difference in our culture and society today, as well as being able to walk out of the class with *my newfound power*” (italics added). While forming, nurturing, and sustaining the loving community of learning, I reflected on Shawn Ginwright’s healing-centered pedagogy and made his framework inform the ways in which I facilitated learning for students. In *Hope and Healing in Urban Education: How Urban Activists and Teachers are Reclaiming Matters of the Heart*, Ginwright makes a case for a pedagogical framework that focuses on the juncture between healing and justice in classrooms:

The healing justice framework requires that we conceptualize oppression as a form of social and collective trauma. This view of oppression allows us to identify and name the cultural, social, and spiritual consequences of trauma for oppressed communities. Trauma conveys the idea that oppression and injustice inflict collective harm. Effectively responding to oppression, therefore, requires a process that restores individuals and communities to a state of well-being. (9)

When engaging with conversations about antiracist teaching tactics with colleagues or reading about pedagogical issues that pertain to racialization and racism, I find that the solutions often lead to the ways in which we recenter Whiteness in the fight against eradicating violence on people of color.

Instead of adopting teaching processes that work to restore individuals and communities—as

Ginwright notes—in ways that we focus, amplify, and empower people of color, we take up too much of our discourse by unraveling the symptoms of White rage, White fragility, White guilt, and White flammability.

Relating to this issue, one of my beloved professors (whose work involves decolonial studies) once asked me a poignant question that deeply changed the way I view social justice frameworks. She asked (and I paraphrased), “Is antiracism really the work that peoples of color need to do, or is it White folks’ responsibility to fix the problem they made? For people of color, our agenda is to decolonize, not to fix White people. We are not responsible for fixing their problems or doing labor for their work toward what they did wrong for us.” Uncovering Whiteness and the harms that come with it is an important topic that deserves attention across all communities of teachers within their classrooms. However, it’s important to critically engage with “who” is doing “what” and “whose” responsibility it is to do “what” and “where.” For White folks, the goal is to undo the damage and fix the system they made that’s broken.

For BIPOC, I don’t think this is our responsibility. For us, the goal of revealing Whiteness is to stay vigilant against the harms that fall on our bodies. We need to examine carefully how the forces of White supremacy attempt to silence us, assimilate us, and attack our body, soul, and spirit, so that we can access our power. We also need to go beyond the rhetoric of “forever-victimhood.” We should also look at all the joyful, amazing ways to thrive despite the forces of violence by tracing our unique heritage, tradition, and creativity informed by our cultural communities. When I teach, it is important to me that I center the needs of the students in my class who are intersectionally disenfranchised in the

system we live in today. And clearly communicating these nuances in the classroom is also important to taking a step further into teaching toward equity.

Where Love Grows, and Where Love Won't Reach

What does it mean for love to grow? What happens after love is formed, nurtured, and sustained? And what does it mean for love to fail? What happens to places where love won't reach? At the end of my teaching internship, these were the questions that came to my mind. After a semester of my students' and my efforts to build a loving environment where we could learn, empathize, and heal from *and* with each other, I was wondering about the ways in which love grew larger and deeper in the hearts of some students and how love could never reach some, despite our efforts. Some students' responses have helped me understand what these may look and feel like. When asked about her understanding and self-positioning in social justice, "Natalie" responded with stark honesty that reflected her own lack of awareness and engagements with other communities' issues in the past and how her positioning transformed while learning in our community.

Studying the course text contributed to my understanding and position in social justice by allowing me to analyze and see the social issues that many people face. Often times [sic] you only focus on issues that only pertain to yourself, but this course reminded me of all the other relevant societal issues. I see myself starting more uncomfortable conversations with others that will lead us to solutions to these issues, which is extremely necessary because it's time for a positive change. If we don't have these conversations, how will other[s] understand the nature of our issues? We must be able to talk and understand each other before we even mention the

issues and solutions. In my opinion, it was the openness of the course that led me to feel this way. We have discussed many sensitive topics that allowed me to feel more comfortable with discussing similar topics.

In Natalie's writing, I recognized how she saw herself in a different state at the moment of her writing compared to before coming into this community. Natalie now sees herself as a part of a collective in our culture wherein each member comes from different backgrounds, and she understands better their individual different struggles against social justice yet very relevant ways. She also sees herself breaking the boundaries of the silence that she was accustomed to and recognizing the will and courage to discuss societal issues to bring "positive change." In her writing, I can see how she transitioned from silence to voice, and from an individual to a community. In *All About Love*, bell hooks argues that love is "an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love" (*All About*, 4-5). The most compelling element in Natalie's response is that she is clearly communicating about her choice to make differences in ways that she can contribute to loving not only her community, but also others, that she can speak the language of love, addressing social justice. Another student of color, "Jen," spoke similar sentiments.

If anything, it [the course] helped me amplify my understanding of social justice OUTSIDE of my own culture. I feel like it is necessary to contribute to bring more social justice to my culture and also different cultures. I really want to create safe spaces and organizations for minorities/people of color who feel that they have no place in this society, or are struggling with trying to make ends meet.

Again, like Natalie, I see how Jen is crossing boundaries in relation to her positioning within social justice. In her writing, Jen talks about how her understanding of social justice is now reaching outside of her own culture, and that she feels the necessity to bring justice to her own and other cultures. After this paragraph, she goes on further into thinking more specifically about how she can implement this will in practical ways when she goes out into her professional career. I'm mulling over the questions I asked at the beginning of this section while looking at these students' writings at the end of the semester. *How does love look like and feel like when it grows?* Maybe, growing love comes in ways that feel like a willingness to become new versions of ourselves. Maybe, growing love gives us courage to break the silence that keeps us divided and separated. Maybe, growing love sounds like calls within us that tell us to care for ourselves and others. Maybe, growing love touches us like warmth that inspires others to do the same.

Closing this chapter that delved into the conscious decisions and engagements I made as a teaching intern, I must acknowledge the fact that as much as there were positive moments, there were elements of failures in the community, too. There was definitely a place where love wouldn't reach within our community. In that same place, there were forces of guilt, fragility, anger, defensiveness, discomfort, defiance, and other emotions that worked to disrupt the ways in which we empowered minoritized members of our community. bell hooks calls this "a space for disempowered collective backlash" (*Teaching*, 31). Oftentimes, when White men are not at the center of a given social space, they feel hurt. They are misguided to think that empowering others means that their power is being taken away. Funnily enough, I couldn't cite these disruptions directly in this essay because those students who displayed such emotions also indicated that they did not want to take part in this

research at all, despite the assurance of confidentiality. However, I can share from my own experience that these students had the audacity to tell me how teaching Critical Race Theory (which I often did) is wrong, and that they should not be judged by their White, male, and upper-class backgrounds. *How does love look like and feel like when it fails?* Maybe, failing love attempts to keep us in silence, dividing us and separating us. Maybe, failing love looks like the defense mechanism that always points their finger outward. Maybe, failing love means that we never want to change, not wanting to become new versions of ourselves. Maybe, failing love comes in ways that feel exactly like how our society fails *us*.

Where does our love go from here? What happens when we create loving communities everywhere? What do they look like in your teaching? How do they feel?

CONCLUSION: REWRITING THE OTHER

I see the version of my name written incorrectly on my computer screen. Is this a memory? Or is this my reality in the present moment? I'm not so sure. When something repeats over and over, it's hard to keep track. I step outside my house and check the mailbox. An envelope with my name falsely spelled out. Who is this person? Is this me? Someone else? Or is it *a version* of me from an alternate universe?

I step back inside the house. Patiently, I correct the errors. I write emails and fill out online forms to request changes. I rewrite my name: Nina Hanee Jang. I make sure if I did it right. I check multiple times for spelling. I hope the changes will be made.

Time goes by. Another email. Another student's paper. Another envelope. People spell my name in ways that I don't recognize as my own. An easy omission. A common spelling error. An unintentional cognitive dissonance. I tell myself that it's just a name. I play that same ol' monologue in my head like a broken record: *You're just being sensitive. It's not a big deal. Don't make things complicated. Just be nice.* I step away.

Then comes the question: *How do you say your name?* I smile the same smile, make the same sound. "Jɑ:ng," I say. The questioner responds: "Oh! J æng!" I keep smiling. "No, more like, JAAAAAAAA-ng," I exaggerate. They blush a little and say, "Oh, I'm sorry. You mean, 'Ch-ang,' right?" My face starts to hurt from all the smiling. I do this bodily movement which is a half-nod and a half-shrug. "That's fine," I try to move on from this conversation. Is this a memory? Or is this my reality in the present moment? I'm not so sure. It's hard to keep track. It's hard to keep *sane*. I get disoriented.

Then comes the *other* question: *Why don't you use your Korean name?* I suppress my impulse to ask back: *Well, why don't you also ask me about my parents' occupations? Or my salary? Or my sexual orientation? Or how many partners I had in bed?* I keep my anger at bay. I become that *Good Immigrant*. I explain how most Americans can't pronounce my name correctly and that I'd prefer not to use my first name that my parents gave me except for close friends and family. Then the oral gymnastics starts again. *How do you say your Korean first name?* I sigh a little before I say "Hæ:nee." The questioner responds: "Oh! Hænee!" "No, more like, HAAAAAAAA-Nee," I exaggerate. I thought I explained to them that I didn't want to be called by that name. Maybe I didn't. I'm not so sure. It's hard to keep track. I feel myself disappear.

I don't think that people truly realize how often this happens to me or how this repetition makes me feel. I don't even know if I can truly express or explain this feeling, either. I just know that I'm not the only one. I just know that the people who share my experience *get it* without me having to explain it. For a long time, that fact alone—that there are people out there who get it; who experience the same reality—was enough. Or, it *had to* be enough because there weren't other options. Or so I thought.

Then I met other Korean Americans who came here before me. They had multiple names. All the Americans call them by the words like Jennie, Ellie, Andy, and Kenny. But we called each other by words like Seoyeon, Boram, Hyunki, and Joonshik. We only introduced our names to each other once and that was enough. As if we've known each other for a long time. I felt alive. I felt like a person again.

These Korean Americans who shared my experience did something for me that I desperately needed to become alive again: rewriting me into existence.

Here's is what I've learned as an immigrant: when something valuable is erased, it doesn't stay erased. It doesn't remain gone. It doesn't stay buried. No matter how long it takes, somebody with a loving memory arrives, digs it up, brings it back, and rewrites it until it comes back alive. Just like how systems of oppression attempt to erase our names, genders, sexualities, and other elements of identities, it also attempts to erase our memories, the narratives about our realities, our childhoods. But our stories never truly disappear. The connection is never lost. I believe that it is the power of love. We will always find someone who understands what we've been through. We will always find the stories that continue to represent our realities and the research that works to illustrate our experiences.

With love, the Other will always be rewritten into existence. Each time, the Other will become more alive, vibrant, and persist.

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