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"They Called Me Kimchi Breath" and Other Short Narrative Essays: A Study in Composing Asian-American Identity in Short Nonfictional Essays

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Abstract

The heterogenous lifestyle of Asian-Americans is one of duality. For this ethnic group, personal identity is a mix between American standard practices and inherited Asian traditions. However, even if their cultural practices are primarily American, Asian-Americans are often "Otherized" and outcast when claiming an American identity, forcing them to be regarded as "just Asian." As such, they are Americans being rejected by America, and as a result have no other place to call home. In this project, I seek to heal the strife this rejection creates, attempting to confront these tensions and resolve them. As a hyphenated American, I am someone who has seen firsthand how my lifestyle is often split into a dichotomy. One arena where this is particularly apparent is food. My culinary choices are a microcosm of my experience, a blend between Korean and American, but primarily seen as "Korean" by others. I accordingly confront the dichotomy of my Asian-American experience by writing food-based essays that reflect on specific events in my childhood.

Introduction

My project concerns writing five short autobiographical narrative essays that center around Asian American identity through the medium of food. In using my food experience, I explore the facets of identity that come with being a hyphenated American. There have been many moments in my life where I have been questioned or caused to question my authenticity as an American, and these essays revisit those moments in a new light, attempting to reconcile and heal myself.

I would like to begin with this Homi Bhabha quote from *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha is a cultural critic well-known for his concept of hybridity, the third and liminal space that someone who has access to two cultures can occupy. Now what Bhabha has to say about this infusion of multiple cultures within individuals is very interesting:

> The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. (*The Location of Culture* 2)

Bhabha here has summarized very succinctly what I struggle with in my identity as an native born American. You see, as much as I would like to move on from what I will refer to as Bhabha's "precedent" identity politics, that is, an identity made for me before I get to create my own, so for instance race, gender, generation, institutional location, and so forth, the world today does not allow for such abandonment. I must always be aware of my subject positions. Identity politics remain at the forefront of many cultures, and oftentimes I am forced to confront, or at the

very least, acknowledge my identity as a hyphenated American, in my case being Asian American! And while there is absolutely nothing wrong with aligning yourself amongst certain cohorts, it would be much more convenient for me to simply identity myself as who I am, rather than who I am believed to be. And so therein lies the initial source of this project: growing up, and essentially all my life, I have always had to acknowledge my Asian-American selfhood. It was always obvious in my appearance, it never left me, it followed me even during the times I tried to lose it. One can imagine then, that since I am very familiar with both parts of me, if you will, the amount of interaction occurring between two very different cultural behemoths of East and West, many of which are positive and enriching. However, not all of these interactions are necessarily positive, and sometimes, these interactions cause very real strife and strain in identity, and cause you to question yourself.

So I desired to come up with a solution. Why live feeling unwelcome or inauthentic in the only country I have known? Thankfully, many scholars have repurposed these personal questions into more philosophical ones and have guided the broader aspects of my project. I may briefly delve into the scholarly concepts that influenced my thoughts. Homi Bhabha's "hybridity" bears close resemblance to the biological term of mixing two cultures, but also refers to an identity tool that a colonized people might use as a way to mobilize and resist oppression. This idea of formulating identity around something that is new, something is not part of the establishment that forces an identity upon you, is an important theme to my project. Further, Emmanuel Levinas' "Other" and "Othering," terms that are sometimes used to denote the unknown, the strange, and exotic, are a very familiar experience in my life, where someone may look at me and denote me as different without taking the effort to get to know me. And then there

is Edward Said's "Orientalism," the actual practice of identity centralization, establishing a narrative that the West's definition of what it's identity is, is the right identity. For people living in America this is quite straightforward to see: many Americans view the ethnic American population as a threat to their own way of living, to their way of life, when in reality, America should be defined by the multiplicity of identities possible. These concepts were in the back of my mind while researching my project, and I paid close attention to them in my final essays as well.

Essay 1: Land of the Free, Home of the Brave

I emerged from the womb consuming kimchi. Well, maybe not quite, but certainly my first memory of eating, as well as getting absolutely *stuffed,* came from eating a plate of kimchi and rice. Whenever kimchi was on the table, I never hesitated to engorge. Now the funny thing is I can remember a lot of my "firsts." My first egg roll, my first dumpling, my first broiled bean stew. But I can never pinpoint the exact time my mom or dad sat me down and introduced me to kimchi. It was always just kind of there. I was already used to kimchi by this time. It's a familiar friend.

I would eat a lot of it during my preschool years. I especially remember frequently eating kimchi during kindergarten as well, because it was so easy for my mom to prepare. Just some kimchi and rice and I would be good to go to classes afterwards. Mom, of course, had dental school to go to. Every day, after I finished my kimchi, I would watch her walk out the door, passing by the flag my dad had put up in the front of the lawn, and to her newly leased Chevy Tahoe. My dad took out the trash, usually at the same time as our neighbor, Mr. Welker, and they would exchange their morning pleasantries. Afterwards, I got ready to go to school, where I was good friends with Mr. Welker's son, Bradley. Indeed, those days I had kimchi for breakfast were pleasant and idyllic times.

Once, when I was about five years old, I recall eating a meal with all the usual rituals: sitting down on the floor, eating off of that short, kids' table, the floral china and decorated metal chopsticks that had my initials on them. My mom then placed some of the kimchi and rice in front of me and I became elated. *Yes,* I thought to myself, *I get to eat kimchi today.* In a happy frenzy, I rushed everything into my mouth, munching down and forgetting to breathe. While the

kimchi transported me to a daydream as I ate, I also began to casually ponder about these chopsticks.

See, there were two distinguishable parts to this childhood of mine. One was, of course, this table where I was enjoying my meal. It was deep mahogany, and all four legs folded in so that it could be stowed away easily. During certain meals I was expected to bring out this table and "set it up," or basically clean it with a damp paper towel. Usually, this was when Grandma and Grandpa sat at the table with my parents, filling up all the chairs. Those times were called the "special meals" and my mom and dad would spend a good portion of the day preparing several separate meals at once. On those "special meal" days, my mom would load the pots and pans with various vegetables, engulfing the entire kitchen with steam. Indeed, we seemed to eat more intentionally and healthier during "special meal" days, and I usually got some food for myself to eat separately on that mahogany table.

The other distinguishable part? The chopsticks.

Oh yes. These were important. The special meals were meant to be eaten with chopsticks and chopsticks only. The first time I had had such a special meal was when Grandma and Grandpa first moved in. They had barely gotten through the door when they saw me and handed me my first pair of personal chopsticks, never mind any hugs or kisses. These utensils were incredibly shiny, as well as very slim. Grandpa turned them over in my hand and motioned to the back of each: my initials were embedded in them. Not recognizing them as gifts, I initially disregarded the chopsticks. I couldn't imagine eating cereal and toast with such things. But when we had our first special meal later during that day, I had my fork taken away from me. In its place were the chopsticks.

"Son, when we eat 'special meals'," explained my dad, "you need to use the chopsticks Grandma and Grandpa gave you." I thought it strange, but did not protest; eventually, I learned how to handle them and could pick up pretty much anything as the strength in my fingers grew. And every time my grandparents saw me use them, they showered me with praises and hugs. I was so confused, but who was I to question such a happy situation? It was simple: use the chopsticks when told to, and boom! One step closer to getting on grandpa's good side.

Well, until I had rushed all the rice and kimchi in my mouth. I was just finishing the last kimchi when my mom suddenly yelled, "Hey!" And I paused mid-pose. Snapping out of my revery on the chopsticks, I used them to put the kimchi down in the center of the plate. Then I looked up at her curiously. She was glaring, and at this point of my youth I was smart enough to know that I had done something wrong. *Aw shoot,* I thought to myself. What did I do?

"Don't you think you're forgetting your *manners*?" she asked pointedly. Ah yes, the manners, I thought. Ever so important at this age and another crucial part of this childhood of mine. Manners were and always would be important. Ms. Accetta at school taught us about manners, as did Ms. Gardner, her assistant. I also learned about manners at church from Deacon Glen, as well as whenever I went to a friend's house ("Why, what good manners you have!"). I learned that sometimes I would have bad manners ("Hey! That's *my* toy. You can't take it! You have bad manners, Teddy"), some in-between manners ("I guess you're ok, but you need to be nicer with sharing your toys!"), or no manners at all, though I didn't know the difference between having bad or no manners. It often seemed that everything revolved around manners.

Troubled that I had disrupted such a crucial part of my world, I began to frantically search my mind for the manners I had, as my mother poignantly put it, "forgotten." *Think, think,*

think; under the relentless gaze of my mother, who was still waiting on an answer (there were no rhetorical questions asked in this house), I had grown desperate to know now what I possibly could have done wrong. Clueless, I made up my mind to give my default answer, which usually had something to do with being a bad boy who "never listened to mommy." But then I heard a hoarse grunt to the right. Grandpa had just taken a seat, and then took the last kimchi sitting on the plate. I had not noticed him sitting there this entire time.

"You just ate all of Grandpa's meal!" chastised my mom, and I now began to see why she had yelled at me. Of course. I had forgotten. The only person in the house who could say they loved kimchi as much as I did was Grandpa (though obviously I loved it more). And I had just eaten every single piece. Grandpa and I usually ate our kimchi together; we were the only ones who could really tolerate eating it frequently. With dread, it began to dawn on me how I had shown some of those bad manners, by leaving him out. But he simply waved his hand, and began slowly chewing the last piece.

At five years old, school was another significant part of my childhood. During the mornings we said the Pledge of Allegiance, as well as listened to the Star-Spangled Banner. Then, Ms. Costantino, the principal, would give the announcements. Our school followed this order like clockwork every day.

I'd like to think that hearing the Star-Spangled Banner indoctrinated me a little bit. At first, I had no idea what the words meant, but one day Ms. Accetta sat us down and began to explain to us the words, line by line.

O say can you see ("This is Francis Scott Key writing while captured!")

By the dawn's early light ("He saw the flag flying over Fort McHenry")

. . . O'er ramparts we watched ("Ramparts mean fortress parts")

. . . O say does that Star-Spangled Banner yet wave

O'er the Land of the Free, and the Home of the Brave! ("This is what it means to be an American, kids. You're free, and you're home with some of the bravest people on earth.")

When they heard that, my entire class cheered. We were so happy to be American. We were part of the best nation on earth, a nation that was unlike any other. Ms. Accetta pointed to Nehemiah, a black friend of mine, and gestured, "Nehemiah, you want to be free to do anything you want?" Nehemiah, wide-eyed, youthful and energetic as ever, yelled "Yes!" We all cheered. *Good for Nehemiah!* I thought. *Even though he is black, he can do anything he wants because racism is gone.* Ms. Accetta then pointed to Cheryl, a Native-American girl, and said the same thing: "Whatever it is you want to be Cheryl, you will always be able to do it!" *Yay for Cheryl,* I thought. *How lucky she is that she is born here and not somewhere else.*

Then Ms. Accetta pointed at me. "Teddy, do you want to become anything in this world? You can do it!" I stopped cheering, puzzled. Why was she pointing at me? But all around my classmates cheered for me. *Did you hear that, Teddy? You're an American now! Good for you Teddy! We should celebrate!* But, I thought to myself, I'm not like Cheryl and Nehemiah. Why would she point at me?

Later, troubled, I went up to Bradley, my neighbor, and asked if he wanted to come over. His eyes widened.

"Really?" he asked, "you want me to come over?"

"Of course," I told him. "Let's do something." But even as I remained cheerful, I could not get rid of the confusion in the back of my mind. I thought of how Travis, Steven, and Henry, my good friends, all looked at me with excitement as Ms. Accetta said I could be anything. She didn't point at them; nor did she point at Brooke, Leslie, or Amanda. Maybe because they all look alike, I thought. But that confused me even more. Didn't I look like them too?

When Bradley and I arrived home, my dad and mom were caught slightly off-guard.

"Who is this Teddy?" asked my dad looking towards my mom.

"This is Bradley. He is Mr. Welker's son." My dad looked slightly confused.

"That's right!" exclaimed my mother. "I have seen him before. But Teddy, next time you want to bring someone over, please tell me and daddy first." With her words of wisdom passing through one ear and out the other, I nodded. Then a thought came to my mind. I couldn't explain why, but I felt that it would make me feel better about what happened in class earlier.

"Mom, can Bradley try some kimchi?" My mom looked at my dad, who shrugged. She hesitated.

"Well that depends," she said. "Bradley, would you like to try some Korean food?" Bradley's eyes brightened and a smile lit up his face.

"Sure!" he replied. "I've never had any before!" Happy at the novelty of it all, I hopped on board and joined in.

"Me too, Bradley! I've never had Korean food before!" Again, my dad looked at my mom, who smirked and then went into the kitchen. My dad then looked back at me.

"Yes you have, Ted," he said.

"Nuh-uh!" I insisted. "I've never had Korean food before! Just American and home food."

My dad stared at me blankly for a bit, then went back to his reading, sighing. He then shook his head. When my mom came back, she brought out two plates of kimchi and rice. *Get ready Bradley*, I said to myself, *you're going to enjoy the experience of a lifetime*. Eager to see his reaction, I resisted taking my first bite, in hopes of seeing him enjoy my mother's cooking.

"Blah!" Bradley spit out the food. "This is so gross!" The smile disappeared off of my face. I watched him wipe his mouth and drink water from his cup. My shock then turned into anger.

"Hey, you can't do that! Put it back into your mouth!"

"No!" he yelled. "I hate it! It's so gross!" And with that he picked up his bag, hurriedly said thank you to my mom, and then ran out of the house with an "I need to go home!" Inside the house, I watched him go, and then picked at his plate as my brow grew more and more furrowed.

I don't recall ever talking to Bradley again.

Why didn't he like the kimchi? I had to wait a long time before finally realizing the answer. Growing up in the very tolerant space that was pre-school, I had yet to discover the pervasive realities of racial dynamics in America. While the words of Ms. Accetta never ring truer than today, this was the start of a journey in my identity, in which I discovered more and more that my way of life was not at all the way of others'. I had always assumed that every family in America abided by the same rules as our house did, and that the way my habits worked would easily translate to others. But little did I know of the many cultural differences that are

present in one community, from even one neighbor to another. This is the hidden threat to someone like me, a model minority; on the surface it is easy to peg everyone as the same and assume that your way of life is the correct way. But as observed with my experience with Bradley, living in that sheltered space prevented me from sometimes seeing the reality of my identity: I was an individual that *was* different to everyone else; I belonged in the same boat as Cheryl, as Nehemiah. Some parts of me were entirely new to others; and sometimes, even my entire self was a novel idea to others, as seen by classmates who cheered me on. Though I only knew of an America in which all were on the same playing field, others knew of an America that was just beginning to accept me. In that idyllic childhood of mine, I was set up to believe that the world was ready to move on from the days of the Civil Rights Movement in the ‘60s and ’70s that we learned about in class. I was ready to believe that children of all colors of the rainbow would, some day, join me hand in hand, like Ms. Accetta said. That the distant horrors of racial discrimination would always be on the television screen, in black and white. But this daydream bubble was about to burst. As I would grow, I would be confronted with compiling evidence that such was not the way of the world. Indeed, it was only a matter of time.

Essay 2: It's Kimbap, Not Sushi

My dad slammed the truck's cover and hit the back. The movers drove off with a wave. "Welcome to New Jersey!" my dad said with a grin before going off to help mom unpack some boxes.

Nine-year-old me sighed. I had begged and begged my parents not to move. I was so in love with California. I had made so many friends, was enjoying school, and was learning how to combat my shyness. Even reeling from the experience with Bradley, California remained dear to my heart. While the image of him spitting out my mom's food was a blot on the memory of my time in the state, I nevertheless had so many other good memories to fill up its space. Now that I was displaced, I could hardly scrape together anything to be happy about.

New Jersey was so different. Its buildings were about a foot apart from each other, and people liked to shout at each other. Its streets were filled with trucks and cars and all sorts of apartment buildings. It seemed as if there was a restaurant, automobile shop, or shopping plaza on every corner. Sidewalks were everywhere, people walked instead of drove, and every third building was a pizza place. The people were just as different too.

"Watch where you're going!" seemed to be uttered a lot, whether indoors, outdoors, or even when I was far away from someone. I guess I was more clumsy than most; my family's sudden move had put me in a certain headspace, and I walked around deep in thought a lot. And New Jerseyites are not afraid to hurl their insults as well.

"What are you blind?" *Harsh.*

"Idiot." *Ouch, that's not very nice.*

"Jesus Christ, get a move on" *Sorry, I didn't see you there.*

"Go back to China!"

Hang on. What? My dad brought the car to a screeching halt. He looked back, but the driver was already gone. Not caring that he was in the middle of a road, dad did a donut and reversed, pulling into the opposite lane. He chased the driver in a dark brown Chevy, until he finally caught up with him. Not slowing down, he looked as if he were going to ram the back of the car. "Dad!" I exclaimed. He let his foot off the gas pedal. I could see the driver look back in his rear view mirror. He took off. My dad pulled into a nearby parking lot. Gone was the smile of moving to a new place; in its stead was frothing anger.

The moment lingered in my mind until the next morning. I couldn't understand why someone would say that to my dad. As I headed to my new school for the first time, the trauma of the previous day's events left me nervous and anxious. I didn't look at anyone, kept my head down, and kept my feet moving at all times. I finally found my classroom and took a seat, still avoiding eye contact.

Why did such a thing happen? I asked myself. These first impressions of New Jersey made me dread the idea of living here even more. I thought back to Bradley and his rejection of kimchi. Did he feel the same way too? Did he want to boot that kimchi back to China? Some unfamiliar feelings began to boil inside of me. I wanted to *do* something, something bad to that driver. Maybe even something bad to Bradley.

But I put away those thoughts in shame; how could I think such violent things?

"Teddy Kim?" I looked up. The teacher was calling my name for attendance.

"Here," I said and quickly looked back down. But something caught my eye. I noticed it briefly while I was looking up, but did I dare put my face out there? What if someone said something?

What if I heard someone calling me something I was not? I grumbled. I did not enjoy being afraid like this. I decided to look up after counting for ten seconds. *10, 9, 8, 7, 6. . . .* I darted my eyes up. I knew it. I was right! I had seen something, and that something was the unmistakable Asian face of the boy sitting next to me. I breathed a silent sigh of relief; at least we were going to be sitting next to each other. But then I looked around some more, and I saw more students that were Asian, some that even looked Korean. I was stunned. I had never before seen this many Asian faces in my life. And to top it all off, the students of other ethnicities in the classroom didn't seem fazed by this either. It was like I was only noticing it for the first time. I put my head back down quickly, scared that others would notice me staring. I couldn't help but wonder, "What if there are more in the school like this? What if there are other Asians?" I gathered the courage to talk to the boy next to me. He seemed friendly enough. *10, 9,* ok enough! Just say something.

"Hey," I whispered. "What's your name?" He didn't look at me initially, but eventually he figured out that I was talking to him.

"Huh? Me? I'm Christian," he said. Christian. Easy enough.

"I'm Teddy," I said. He nodded and smiled. Then he went back to listening to the teacher call out the names. It was a simple interaction, but it gave me enough assurance that maybe everything would be all right. Such began my time in Fort Lee, New Jersey, where I would spend nearly six years in school.

Kimbap is a Korean dish similar to sushi, but different in many ways. For one, it has many more ingredients such as julienned carrots, pickled radish, sesame seed oil drenched rice,

spinach, ginger root, and avocado, to name a few. It is an eclectic arrangement of many ingredients, and though each appears to be selected randomly, kimbap is a culinary example that what seems impossible to bring together individually, can actually be quite harmonious.

In fact, the first time I ate kimbap at my new school, some of my classmates gawked and asked me what I was eating. I explained to them that it was called kimbap. Someone said that it reminded them of sushi. Alex, a Jewish classmate, looked over with disgust.
"That's not sushi! It's kimbap! One is Korean, and the other is Japanese! That's what Henry Chen told me." I was at a loss for words. What a stark contrast to the driver that yelled at my dad. Alex was very eager to educate my classmates on the difference, and for his actions, as well as for that student body's general tolerance towards Asian culture, I was truly grateful.

But there is a catch to such an analogy. While kimbap certainly seems very open-minded about its ingredients, each must be prepared in a certain manner. The carrots must have sugar added to them, the spinach must be broiled and then glazed with oil, the rice cannot have anything other than sesame seed oil, and the list goes on. If someone were to fall short in any of the steps of preparation, their attempt to create unity out of these many ingredients would result in a foul taste. The line between delight and disaster, for kimbap at least, is a fine one.

Likewise, one of the lessons I learned in Fort Lee was that just because a great many people were brought together in one place, didn't mean that racial harmony would exist. On the contrary, it inflamed it some ways, and there were definitely more moments that served to prove this. Korean store owners would sometimes face discrimination, Chinese restaurants would be graffitied, and the Asian cultural center would face annual calls for its closure. But the Asian population in Fort Lee would go on, despite these oppositions. In fact, it would actually flourish,

and soon Fort Lee joined its surrounding neighbors of Palisades Park, Leonia, and Cliffside Park in becoming a metropolitan Korean hub. Even still, I wished that this success did not have to come at the expense of the well-being of some.

I sat on the sidewalk as I watched one such store close down. Many residents refused to shop there because they believed many of the items were made in China, and therefore not durable. As a result, it went quickly out of business. I liked the woman who ran it. She was very nice to me. Now, she was on the phone, sobbing to someone that she had to take off the front sign.

Was this the America Ms. Accetta was talking about?

Essay 3: Surprising Discoveries

While dealing with the stress and growing pains of learning more about the world, I was grateful for the break that family provided. Culturally of course, family are some of the best people you can have in your life. No one understands how you live better than the people related to the ones who raise you. My mom's sister was no different. In gathering with my aunt's family, I found a haven from the occasional harshness coming from the world. I was always grateful for them: they gave me a zone to retreat from society--a society whose realities I was not ready to face.

What exactly was it like at my family gatherings? The answer varies, depending on the number of relatives present. For a small event like Thanksgiving weekend, my parents and I would usually go up to Long Island from our New Jersey home. These occasions occurred fairly often, as we did not live far from each other, but the drive still drained us of an hour and a half of our lives each direction. The Cross Bronx highway traffic was merciless and sluggish. Inching along in it was soul-sucking. Indeed, the ride there was filled with the usual griping and complaining, especially when I was younger and knew little of the virtue of being patient (or least faking patience, as I was to learn that holding my tongue was valuable when dealing with irritated parents). There just always seemed to be an accident clogging up the highway. And even more disappointing was discovering that the accident had gotten cleaned up before we arrived at the scene, after dozens of cars ahead of us would rubberneck, and tie up the traffic even more. On top of this, every car ride would inevitably turn into a bicker fest. Lengthy periods of time spent together would precipitate some sort of petty argument between my parents, as they found car rides forced too much time with each other in too crowded a space. Someone would always

find something to complain about. It would start when someone made a comment that rubbed the other the wrong way—akin to a criticism or a complaint— and one of those moments where the complainant could have stated their thoughts better, and the accused could have had more patience.

On one such day, in the midst of a cold November when everything outside seemed to be white, my mom observed that a dog was sticking its head out of the window of another car (I still wonder how it could tolerate the freezing weather). It had so far been a nice trip, and nothing negative had been said yet. Cruising along the highway, we made small chatter to each other. My mom pointed out this dog, and said to my dad,

"I wish we had a dog like that." She shot my dad a furtive glance, while casually removing her gloves. *Tsk, tsk,* I thought to myself. She should have been more tactful. She had just created an opportunity for the usual discourse, ruining an otherwise fine moment. While her words appeared innocent enough, my mom had already raised this topic several times with my dad. His response was always the same. Refusal. End of discussion. Still, mom desperately wanted a dog to play with. She believed our house could hold one more dependent. My dad believed he was the only one that kept the house standing anyways, as he mowed the lawn, did most of the laundry, and cleaned it up whenever guests came. He refused to do more work. He insisted that my mom and I would be too lazy to take care of any kind of pet-- a prediction that would eventually prove true.

Despite my dad's promises to be understanding should she have little outbursts here or there, her brief comment gave away enough of what she was really trying to say: she wanted a dog, and was not willing to take no for an answer this time. My dad remained fixated on the road

ahead of him, tightly gripping the heated steering wheel. Slowly, taking his time to make sure he did not misfire a phrase that would cost him his wife's good mood, he spoke.

"Honey, we've had this conversation before."

Of course, what was going through his mind was not only did they talk about this before, but they also had a conversation about not bringing up this topic again. Though he admirably attempted to keep his voice from sounding strained and irritated, my mom was able to read right through his coded demeanor, and light the fuse of spousal argument before he could, sending at least one form of heat into our chilly car. She attacked first.

"Isaac, I only ask a few things from you. . ." And what began as a nice car ride turned into the usual back and forth pettiness. Thankfully this argument did not involve me. I turned my attention to the pale white wind frost that was accumulating on my window.

When we finally arrived at the cousins', we were greeted warmly by little Matthew, my younger cousin, who was so elated to finally see people besides his mischievous older brother (who constantly annoyed him), that all exasperation acquired on the way there was beginning to be forgotten.

"Hello-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!" he dragged out in his pre-pubescent voice. A sensitive and emotional boy, he hugged my mom first (they had always been close), and unsure of himself, greeted me and my dad, hesitant to give other males a hug. Still though, we showered him in our embraces, squeezing the reluctance out of him. Then came over his older brother, his mom, and his dad, all with their own version of "hello":

"He—llo—w!"

“Hullo!”

“Hell—llo!”

Leaving the outside chill behind us, we gratefully stepped into the pleasantly lighted and well-heated home. All around were decorations of autumn leaves and Matthew’s handmade turkeys from art class. My parents were slightly overwhelmed by the drastic change in environment. And of course, with each subsequent embrace, my parents’ and my demeanor became much snugger and flusher, as our faces became red not from the heated exchange prior, but from the rosy glow that ensues when in that holiday season.

Thanksgiving was a special day. Unlike other family gatherings on the holidays, Matthew’s family and mine always kept Thanksgiving as one between ourselves, seldom inviting anyone outside of our pent-up circle. My uncle, the most amazing cook, always prepared illustrious meals that no soul would ever want to miss, not for work, not for play, and certainly not because you “weren’t hungry.” We made our way to the table where the seemingly infinite amount of food lay. On the side was the glazed cornbread, emitting the same glow as the foyer earlier. Next to that lay the cheesy rice, still cooking itself and oozing with its parmesan-mozzarella glory. Across from that was the squash and butternut casserole, my uncle’s signature dish, one that he worked hours on. Preparations for it had begun about four hours ago, and what emerged was a mouth-watering masterpiece, its broccoli and acorn toppings sticking out of the batter. Finally, there was the buttered and golden turkey along with the creamy butter-pecan pie, the two centerpieces standing on their own. Everything was simply overwhelming. The seasoned and reddened monkey bread stuffing, the brown slow-cooked

mashed potatoes, the welcoming yellow sweet cauliflower and egg salad, and the pumpkin cheesecake. It was all I could do to keep from crying tears of joy.

Such extravagant meals would make any American Thanksgiving a welcome one. And such illustrious meals that I would share with my family throughout the years would undoubtedly contribute to the warmth and elation I often sought to create in my interactions with people. With these family gatherings, I could strip off the guise of my everyday persona, and reveal my more vulnerable self. It was the ultimate space for security. But as life would have it, these moments of peace, would always be punctured at some point by unpleasantness. A rude person here, one there, an argument one day, a confrontation the next. Why life could not remain as blissful as it was during family Thanksgivings, was always a pertinent question of mine. Why couldn't the atmosphere of that living room in Long Island remain with us until long after the end of the holiday? Still to this day I ponder this mystery. Why did that man verbally assault my father earlier? Why did such cruelty exist in this world? I struggled with the thought that I may never have the answer.

But such ponderance has no place in holiday, hearth, and home. If anything, this particular Thanksgiving was a lesson in resolution and restoration of human relations. And it started with the cheesecake.

My mom thoroughly enjoys a good cheesecake, and pumpkin is one of her favorite flavors no less. Still mulling over her wounds from the car argument earlier, she had been shunning my dad, while putting on a happy face for everyone else. But she was never a good

actor, and the awkwardness seeped throughout the evening. I shuddered to think that this holiday would be ruined so soon.

But my dad, pensive and deep in thought, walked over to the table, skipping prayer and everyone else, (committing a cardinal sin of Thanksgiving), took a clean silver knife and fork and sliced a piece of the cheesecake. I watched him with curiosity. What was he doing?

It would take some more years before I could fully understand what my dad then knew instinctively: the best way to alleviate broken relationships is through communal activities. One of these activities is breaking bread together. Crossing over the divide, he then looked over to my mom, gesturing her over with his fork, wordlessly asking *do you want it?* He was willing to make peace with her, by sharing a piece. My mom looked at him for a bit, exhausted but rejuvenated. She smirked. She took his hand with the fork, and together they put it in her mouth. Instantly, the outside cold was the faintest of memories.

Essay 4: The Politics of Lunch Time

By sophomore year of high school, I had moved again. Whereas the school I had met Christian in was filled with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese-Americans, Montville, New Jersey was mainly Caucasian. Now, it's safe to say that all high schools follow the same chain of operation: clicks, popular kids, not so popular kids, in-between kids, branching out into different interest groups, including sports, music, theater, and various clubs. And indeed, I found that the blueprint for this high school and the high school where I had spent my freshman year in, was roughly equivalent.

But like any comparison between two communities, there were subtle differences. Differences that I would have difficulty pointing out and expressing to my new friends in Montville. And because Montville was all they knew, I was the one who had to adjust to their way of doing things, not the other way around, of course. Whereas Fort Lee was filled with blacks, whites, and Hispanics that understood my Korean way of life, I found myself explaining Asian-American living a lot more in Montville.

"You mean you guys don't really hang out after school?" I asked my peers. They stared at me blankly.

"No, not really," one of them finally said.

"Well then, what do you do?" A pause. They looked at each other confused. *Why is he asking such weird questions?*

"I usually just go to practice," Zach said. "We have to practice for two hours on varsity."

"I go to our Rotary club meetings!" said Serena.

"I babysit on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and then go to the School-of-Rock practices," said Jack Momdel.

For the first time I can remember, I was truly at a loss. I was aware of several factors in this situation. One was how different life was more instate than closer to the coasts. Fort Lee, after all, is right across from Manhattan and thus basically served as its extension. For school lunches we had tacos on Monday, steak on Tuesday, gnocchi on Wednesday, and some occasional hotpot every other Thursday. During high school, it was common to join the big Korean group and hang out after class, not worrying about schoolwork or extracurriculars. There was no talk of varsity or Rotary clubs. In addition, I was aware that as much as Montville's culture mystified me, I mystified my friends there as well. And the awareness of this double confusion made me even more frustrated. How could I point out how weird they were, when *I* was the one who was different from them? I couldn't bore them with stories of Fort Lee, nor could I argue that they were any more quirky than I was.

Eventually, I found my place in Montville, but not without its struggles. Unfazed at this point with other people seeing me eat kimbap (Fort Lee had alleviated any qualms), I packed some for lunch and brought it to school. When I opened it, everyone at my table pulled their shirts over their noses.

"Ewwwww, what is that?" As they asked, I could feel the stares of other nearby tables around me. Puzzled at first, I calmly answered them.

"It's kimbap," I said. Just as I was about to give them the beginner talk on the differences between kimbap and sushi, someone interjected.

"Kimchi? Is that kimchi? No wonder it smells! Kimchi smells really bad, right? You have kimchi breath!" The progression of those words, actually uttered in that order, confused me at first, and I was ready to wipe it away with some educating words. But soon after, some others joined in.

"Kimchi breath? You have kimchi breath!" they jeered. Dumbfounded by how they could use kimchi breath as an insult, while not knowing what kimbap was, I didn't say anything. It was only a few people anyways. The glory of high school is that it was nothing like the movies; I was never bullied, nor did I know anyone who was.

What made things complicated, however, was that I did not keep my mouth shut out of my own free will. Even if high school was totally unlike the movies, it was still important to have clout and be popular. And it just so happened that one of the more popular girls in school was currently calling me Kimchi Breath along with one of her friends. Christine was her name, and she was pretty. I sported a mild crush on her and wanted to get to know her. She was in orchestra with me, but that gave us little chance to talk. So lunchtime was really the only way to get to know her. Indeed, I decided not to say anything out of risk of insulting her or one of her friends, and then isolating myself from their circle. I looked down, and began eating my lunch. But soon after, I felt a tugging sensation in my mind. As I looked down, the different ingredients of the kimbap looked at me again. Carrots in the top left, glazed spinach in the bottom right, pickled radish in the middle. It was so colorful, and vibrant. *Maybe*, I thought, *I could show Christine and her friends why I liked it so much.* I looked towards her table; they had already forgotten about their insults before. Now she was just talking, enjoying herself, maybe I could--

No. What is wrong with you? A voice of reason demanded. *Why are you trying to curry favor with her, when she just made fun of you*? Indeed I had to step back and think for a bit. What was I trying to accomplish? What sort of Stockholm Syndrome was this? A history lesson from earlier that day popped into my head: *sometimes,* my history teacher told us, *politics requires sucking it up for now, so you can sucker punch them later.* Maybe this was just me learning how to be a politician. I quickly put the thought away. While I may have been trying to lick my wounds, it didn't feel like any sucker punch was coming later. It felt more as if I was looking for her approval for some reason. Torn between reaching out, and retaining my pride, I sat in silence.

When I got home later that day, I began to feel anger swell up inside of me. At first, I was angry that some people were willing to embarrass me. Then I realized that they were intentionally being ignorant of the food and information I was trying to share. Their choice to blatantly ignore what I had said hurt a lot. But most of all, I was angry at my willingness to forgive Christine so quickly. Had I not learned anything about family pride? Was I willing to stoop that low, bringing dishonor to our home? I sat on my bed for about an hour, pondering what I should do.

I made up my mind to go back and confront Christine and her friends who had started the name-calling. In a small, but momentous decision, I decided to do what was right, and stand up for myself. I walked up to their table, and waited for them to acknowledge my presence.

"Uh, hey," one of them said finally. I took a deep breath.

“Don’t call me kimchi breath,” I bellowed at them. The cafeteria grew silent for a moment, and then slowly resumed its normal chatter. I exhaled sharply. The table was stunned, all silent for a second. I promptly turned my head before any of them could say anything, and walked away.

I definitely had a lot to learn about confrontations and explaining myself. But within me, I could not help but feel a little ball of pride. The rest of the day was a blur. Some people talked, some pointed, but I managed to ignore most of it.

When I walked through the door, my mom greeted me. “Hi son! I got home early today. What do you want to eat for dinner?” I thought about it for a moment.

“Some kimbap would be nice.”

Essay 5: They Called Me Kimchi Breath (The Present Situation)

It has been two years since I have yelled at Christine. She's in Boston somewhere, and I am just finishing up my last AP test. Now a senior, I have sent in all my applications and am now just waiting to hear back. I can feel the freedom of my graduation within my grasp.

To celebrate my last test, my parents offer to take me out to eat. Fighting off the nausea from the car ride, I gaze outside the Audi's window in what seems an endless journey to the SGD Tofu House. Coming from suburban Montville, the urban pace of this upper New Jersey region always gives a slight jolt. Montville is known for its friendly neighbors, green grass, arboreal clusters, and picturesque houses. We have houses complete with backyards, schools with respectable budgets, enough parks for every dog, and an active town hall. So, every time I look at the dingy and gum-blotted concrete that is SGD's sidewalk, the plethora of shops and stores stacked on top of each other, and the bumper-to-bumper traffic in this dense town, I immediately feel the difference. Every other minute, a car honks or tires suddenly halt. The intersections seem to move in a visual rhythm of red, green, yellow, emitting an auditory cadence of screech, honk, shout. My dad, who grew up in the Bronx with its contorted roads, expertly parallel parks, stressing out my mom in the process. She grew up in Jackson Heights, another neighborhood located in New York City, but not nearly as bustling as the Bedford-Stuyvesant stomping ground of my dad.

Stepping out of our meticulously detailed car, I place my foot on the soot-covered sidewalk, catching a whiff of every scent known to man. But because of the busy roads, the wind resulting from passing cars steals every odor that comes my way, thankfully leaving me with the

smell of only gas and old metal. I've lost count of how many times I've been to the SGD Tofu House in Palisades Park. And though I am thirty minutes from my house, I feel home.

The restaurant, obscurely tucked away on the second floor of a plaza that takes up an entire block, is cramped between other services including a dentist's office, another restaurant, a moving service, and a jewelry store. My mom, dad, and cousin Michael walk up the flight of rainbow-colored stairs leading to our culinary pot of gold. Soon, I begin to smell the umami and MSG that activates every indulgent, gluttonous, and ravenous part of my brain. Reaching the waitress, we find out that we have not come at a busy time and are seated immediately. Our table, varnished with bamboo wood and evidently worn down, smells of water and clean drying towels, and we deduce the busboy has just cleared it. This table is nailed to the floor, which is also of the same varnished wood. I take my seat in a stiff, but stable wooden chair, slightly sliding it out of its position. It screeches hysterically as it creaks under my weight, but no one pays attention; we are after all in a different setting than an American restaurant. In a Korean restaurant, the side noises that result from dining are not paid any attention. Expect to hear every slurp, chopstick clang, crunch, table bell that rings waiters, and exhale of satisfaction that accompany every point of the meal. With so much ambient noise, customers naturally raise their voices, trying to get their ever-important point across to their dinner mate, whether that entails celebrating a visionary business deal, or scolding a child to eat all of his food. All around me, I picture hot spoons entering adults' mouths, cold cans of Sprite being cracked open by children, and crackling beef ribs simmering on a hot pot. Even my parents, who consider themselves rather "gentrified" compared to many other Korean-Americans, do not mind my slurping and open-mouthed chewing here. It is not that at this restaurant all manners disappear; rather, it is

here that the mainly Korean audience may figuratively kick off their American shoes, freeing themselves of the burdens of trying to fit into the other's cultural standards. This space defines community, one that is made up of similar people that tell each other *I know you, and you know me.*

I am awakened from my trance by the arrival of our side dishes, our *banchan.* Side dishes are an intrinsic component of every Korean meal: there is no exception or special case. Every single meal that is served by a Korean person will include banchan. If not, the meal is considered incomplete. It would still be edible of course, but it would be analogous to eating only the fries of a Happy Meal. Every restaurant serves complimentary banchan before the main course, as they help fulfill a sort of appetizer role, as well as complement the main courses later. And the best part about banchan, besides their flavor, is the fact that they are free and have unlimited refills; a customer needn't feel timid about asking for more. The banchan served by SGD happens to be salted bean sprout, kimchi cucumbers, and kimchi itself, all in small, porcelain bowls. Bean sprouts are a staple of any side dish set. An unspoken rule of most cooks, whether in restaurants or at home, is to keep the recipe the same – in other words, there are very few ways to cook bean sprout besides its most well-known method. Each individual might have their own nuances and slight variations in the dish, but every guest can expect the same thing: they are white when raw and rather bulky from the amount of water they absorb. But once they are steamed and salted, they shrivel up and turn yellow. And since they have little natural taste, the amount of salt added influences their taste significantly. The quantity of salt added varies from person to person. In front of it is a bean sprout dish that is not too salted. But this particular batch also has some grassy scallion and dark green onion accompanying the pale-yellow features.

Taking my chopsticks and shoving these impurities out of the way, I dive in for some pure and fresh sprout. The few pieces I pick up on my chopstick are then slapped out of my hand, as my mom reminds me that we have not said our prayer yet. Embarrassed, and also slightly irritated at the delay of my anticipations, I lay down my utensils and bow my head.

Finishing our prayer, I prop my eyes open and regain my grip on my chopsticks. As I steady my aim and widen the opening of my two fingers, another side dish catches my eye. It is kimchi cucumbers. Placed slightly closer to me than the bean sprouts, they pose a great temptation. The cucumbers are marinated in pickled spice solution, dashed with sugar. They are sour, sweet, savory, and salty all at the same time; pickled, spicy, crunchy, and thoroughly delightful. They might as well have been calling my name aloud. Releasing my firm hold on the bean sprouts, and placing an iron grip on the first cucumber, I put it in my mouth and let the flavors punch their way around. The chili peppers are the first to attack, harshly hooking onto any part of my tongue they come into contact with. Following their lead, the sour tang of the fermented sauce invades next, strong enough to make a novice kimchi eater wince, but undaunting to my veteran palette. Then comes the oddly contrasting sweetness, layered below the more aggressive sour and spicy intruders. With each crunch, all three flavors fight for their space on my tongue, eager to gain my attention. Alas, some water still remains in the cucumber despite its fermentation. This new invader pacifies the war inside my lips. Instinctively I swallow. I cannot bear the watered-down version of the cucumber. This process is one of many dining roller coasters I ride in the course of such a fine meal, as I begin starting on the rest of the cucumber pieces and repeating the exhaustive experience.

Way over on the side, the pure kimchi side dish laying by itself, is pitifully neglected by me. This is odd, as it is the quintessential Korean contribution to global cuisine. Normally, any other person would have started and ended with the kimchi as their side dish appetizer. Or at the very least, they would have eaten a sizable amount, usually requesting two or more refills. But for someone to leave it completely untouched is a foreign sight. And indeed, I attract strange looks from the servers, who wonder if something is wrong with the dish. But it's simple really; I am just too preoccupied with my current company to pay any attention to it. I do not care for the kimchi here. I have enough of it at home, at school (when my parents pack it), and even on vacations where my parents get homesick and suddenly bust out the jar of kimchi they had packed. In my mind, to come here for the kimchi (or to pay to eat kimchi at any restaurant really) would be like a New Yorker paying for a day trip just to get pizza. It's impractical, unnecessary, and there are better options. I don't need a restaurant to serve me kimchi, when I have an abundance at home. Still, after waiting around for the refill of cucumber and bean sprouts, I think upon that day with Bradley and that moment with Christine. Maybe it's asking me for another chance.

I acquiesce. I owe it to the dish to do so.

Though I started Montville with a miserable first experience, things came first circle. I found my friend group, joined multiple clubs, and got to know some of the most wonderful human beings on earth. Though my time there had some momentary instances of "education," as I'll call it, when I became a senior, I felt nearly all my burdens lifted. Our class was growing up, we were finally maturing, and the thought of awkward growing pains, whether physical, cultural,

or racial, seemed far away. In moving to a new and different district, I began to see the value in stepping outside of my shoes, and into others. Certainly, I should retain pride in my heritage and my family's roots. But that did not have to come at the forefront of every interaction of mine. Like all things, it needed a balance. And in Montville, by being immersed in a place where I had to start over, where even my closest friends didn't know what I ate for lunch, balance eventually became a much appreciated staple.

Reflection

I have decided to conclude the project on a note of reflection. In looking back upon my experience conducting this research, I have come to two conclusions. The first is that while much work remains to be done, I believe I was able to successfully incorporate racial and identity theory from Asian-American scholars into my life experiences, as I had carefully selected these themes, and verified them intertextually, or from one text to another. While I would be hard pressed to prove this without a critic or large audience, I found that integration of these two parts was a smooth process and had a variety of precedents for comparison, including other Asian-American authors. The second is that this project achieved its main purpose of reconciliation and healing. I can confidently say I now walk away with a better outlook on who I am and my selfhood.

Through these evaluations I can say with reasonable assurance that the essays contain useful strategies of how to confront identity tension. I bear witness through writing these essays, how to come to terms with some of the harsher realities of Asian-American identity, reaching a point of acceptance and resolution. Though it seems that complete harmony between cultures will never be possible, like many other things in life, it is a fact that we must accept and move on. Indeed, I have learned through these essays that to flourish on earth, human beings cannot simply ask for a better life, but must appreciate what they are given and do the best with what they have. I cannot change my skin color, nor can I change the family I come from. I cannot ask to restart and be born as a part of the hegemonic culture. But I can challenge the notions of such power dynamics and question the nature of such relationships. And I have done so in my essays.

lIn writing about my experiences, in showing how tension and conflict may develop even in those who are not seeking it, I question the legitimacy of any power dynamics at all. I believe that it is in these small pockets of resistance that I believe the most powerful stories are told. Those small, but firm voices of memory and experience can never be truly erased, and the more we dialogue about them, the stronger they become. Let us then continue this tradition of storytelling. It is one of the most human things we can do.

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