

Skye W.

Manhattan, New York

Tainted Identities

Acrylic on Canvas

My paper and tryptic paintings focus on the significance of identity and the complexities in which it breeds. During my time at Oxbow, all of my artworks have shared parallels between their themes and artistic styles. At the core of who I am and how I aspire to develop my artistry, I use the agency in my identity to paint my stories. It is essential to acknowledge and understand my background as it strings together the intricacies in my identity from culture, history, memory, family, tradition, and values. Alex Katz and Josef Albers are two important artists that have shifted the way in which I approach my artwork. I am inspired by the flat painting style that Alex Katz uses and Josef Albers's attention to the meaning of color. In my artwork, I portrayed the importance of family, memory and tradition, and food culture. My first painting to the left depicts me and my brother as toddlers, pinching and strangling each other to represent the happiness in my early youth. My family was the first part of my identity so I wanted to express my relationship with my brother. My second painting is a memory I had a few winters ago before Chinese New Year. My mother left her purple sweater on a chair before we left for my grandma's house to celebrate Chinese New Year, and this picture has been instilled in my mind as a symbol of tradition. Additionally, the last painting is a food scene. Food culture is extremely important in my family because it unites everyone through love. My narrative is built upon multiple stories and ideas and I hope to amplify how important my identity is to who I am today through my paintings.

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Skye W.

The Oxbow School

OS48

Writer's Note: This paper addresses the complexities of identity. People tend to neglect the many aspects of their identity, however, they subconsciously carry values that are affected by their ancestors and surroundings. This paper hopes to highlight the importance of acknowledging one's own history and culture, while also learning how to claim agency over one's unique identity.

Identity is the amalgamation of memory, history, narrative agency, stories, and self-expression. A person's lived experience changes their own perceptions of the world, and that can happen consciously or subconsciously. The intimacy in first hand experiences allow for an individual to decide how they manipulate these instances to tell their stories.

Although our personal experiences shape who we are, the unique distortion of second hand memories, stories, and histories that we witness can equally impact the ways in which we think critically about society. Historically, the presence of Asian people's perspectives have been neglected in the United States' values as a nation. Our identities stem from a wide range of lessons and insights that have accumulated over time and over generations. My identity is complex and my stringent values and morals are generational; my metacognition is holistic, encompassing my individual, shared, and familial backgrounds.

My family's dinner table is a petri-dish for conversation. The mannerisms I have are influenced by my parents and my older brother. Family foundation can support a sense of establishment and plays an integral role in the idea of identity exploration: humans find their identity through building relationships with others. In my adolescence, there were very few people that dictated my decisions and actions. The main factor was my family. My parents in particular, as well as my brother, Nicholas, asserted a rather tainted asymmetrical authority over me. I observe

parallels in my morals to theirs in which a development of my character has been constructed through familial and relational factors. Every family cultivates a culture.

In the 1980's, the idea of organizational cultures was disseminated through management theorists and consultants. They remarked on the apparent structural elements in corporations, which later became a reflection of cultures in communities as a whole. Conformity began to spread at large by those in power, typically bosses, who passed down their norms to employees in their businesses. Whether or not people are aware of the complex structures that create the main principles in a family culture, conformity to these norms, traditions, and values will remain inevitable. It is in fact the reinforcement of the family culture that promotes communal ideals. To name a few, my parents are insistent on teaching their children manners, work ethic, respect, and integrity. We celebrate a few traditions and holidays, those of which include Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chinese New Year, and birthdays. Tradition creates pattern through its concerted effort in maintaining balance. Preserving and participating in these traditions also symbolizes a mark of reverence for one's community members.

I was born into my family, I had no choice but to be surrounded by my parents and brother, and subconsciously I treat people with the qualities my parents instilled in me. Everyone's family culture is intricately woven with their unique values, forging identities at a young age. When adolescents leave their homes, they can choose to represent the culture they were immersed in growing up. No matter what their choice is, a person's adolescence is subconsciously inherent to their identity.

The pivotal point in the way I saw myself was in my sophomore year of high school. I enrolled in a Humanities class that combined English, Ethics, and History and there were four teachers from each department: Ms. Apostol, Ms. Ehrlich, Mr. Noel, and Ms. Resnikoff. The class

size was around thirty students. The first novel we read was “Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning” by Cathy Park Hong. This book challenged my responsibilities that I uphold as an Asian American female, and answered the many questions I had that were floating around in my head, but never expressed out loud. One of the most profound points Hong makes is the idea of an established binary of race between Black and white people. However, where do Asian people stand within these borders?

A favorite excerpt of mine from *Minor Feelings* is when Hong speaks to the absurdity of how and what Asian Americans are allowed to feel in the reality of the racial structures that have been used to block our authentic emotions in this country. “*Minor feelings occur when American optimism is enforced upon you, which contradicts your own racialized reality, thereby creating a static of cognitive dissonance. You are told, “Things are so much better,” while you think, Things are the same. You are told, “Asian Americans are so successful,” while you feel like a failure... Minor feelings are also the emotions we are accused of having when we decide to be difficult— in other words, when we decide to be honest... Our feelings are overreactions because our lived experiences of structural inquiry are not commensurate with their deluded reality,*” (Hong 56-57). Our feelings have been belittled— they are indeed *minor*. This quote also lends itself to Hong dismantling a historical and commonly used phrase to describe Asian people: ‘model minority.’ Hong explains that Asian people are seen to be directly beneath white people— that we are ‘next in line.’ The only adamant feature in an Asian person’s character is their illusory success, when we have actually been lost in the country’s ‘*amnesiac fog*,’ according to Hong. Additionally, Asians are ‘*stooges to a white ideology that exploited our ancestors,*’ as a consequence of ‘model minority’ being labeled on our foreheads. The ‘success’ that Asian people obtain has a good connotation to the rest of the world, but in reality, the idea of a ‘model minority’ and ‘unlimited

success and opportunities' is a false reality, one that has been used to justify the negligence towards acknowledging the existence of Asian people's feelings. This stereotype is harmful because it is incomplete and paints an inaccurate portrait of the many sacrifices and injustices that Asian people have tolerated and lived through in history. It puts Asian people in a state of turmoil.

In *Minor Feelings*, I also learned about the cruel histories Asian people have endured in America, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, signed by President Chester A. Arthur to prohibit Chinese immigration to the United States for ten years. As a result, this became the first of many future immigration laws, to ban a race from entering the United States. *"Legislators and media characterized the Chinese as "rats," "lepers," but also "machine-like" workers who stole jobs from good white Americans,"* (Hong, 21). In the United States, these stereotypes/racist laws were used towards creating an ethnic cleansing— a way to sterilize the many cultures grounded in the country's soil.

Another interesting idea Hong mentions is 'childhood.' *"Rather than look back on childhood, I always looked sideways at childhood... The alignment of childhood with innocence is an Anglo-American invention that wasn't popularized until the nineteenth century. Before that in the West, children were treated like little adults who were, if they were raised Calvinist, damned to hell unless they found salvation,"* (Hong, 69). Hong explores how predominantly white industries, such as Hollywood, have followed a thread of fetishizing times in history through white nostalgia, which refuses to acknowledge the violent experience people of color had to suffer. 'Childhood' is a fictional concept of white supremacy to Hong. When children of color witness their role models, maybe their parents, siblings, or friends, become vulnerable or experience racism, more specifically— hatred and bigotry— this white supremacist idea of 'childhood' fades

away. Children of color cannot create a timeline for when their ‘innocence’ and ‘childhood’ is going to end simply because of the racial injustices already rooted in this country.

Despite ‘childhood’ being an abstraction of white supremacy to Hong, the memories and values I have gained when I was younger, immersed in my ‘childhood’, from my parents, my brother, hobbies, and surroundings do translate into who I am now. I do agree with Hong that a person of color’s ‘childhood’ will not be ‘ordinary’ or coherent in relation to a white person’s ‘childhood’, because there is a gloom of perpetual and structural relationships to the historical racism in this country. In contrast, what shifts for me in that idea is how people of color can still maintain a great level of happiness and memories in their early years that render their unique identity. I do recognize that I grew up extremely privileged— living in a house with more than enough resources, being a daughter to a healthy relationship of two married parents, and going to an elite private school in New York City. However, I can be grateful and acknowledge my background while also acknowledging the history of white nostalgia fetishizing dark times for people of color and the idea of fictional ‘childhood’ for Hong. Indefinitely, I will have a strong connection to my ethnic background, my family, and my early memories. My opinion about ‘childhood’ differs from Hong’s because even though I do not wish to romanticize ‘childhood’, it is still vital to who I am today. I have happy memories, but I have still been exposed to the outside world and the hatred that it breeds. However, these experiences have both exposed me to the broken system of this country and how one can still find empowerment in the face of oppression. I have only found my solace and empowerment because of my recollection of what my parents taught me at a young age.

As I reflect on the reason as to why *Minor Feelings* had such an impact on me, maybe it was because I felt angry all this time but never knew how to articulate my feelings. I had so much

pent up anger and confusion about my identity and stored them away in a container when those emotions had to be let out. This book became a driving force, a tool of guidance, as I found agency through Hong's words. The novel also follows a literary device: dialectical synthesis. This process allows readers to be aware of the many struggles and discriminatory actions towards Asian people, however, the novel progresses towards a positive note, a note of empowerment and justice.

A great amount of what I understand about my familial and cultural background is from memory. Particularly, there are different types of memory, one being communicative memory: knowledge and memory obtained through everyday communication. In families, there are oral histories passed down, shaping stories that have their unique twists by each person who tells their interpretation. In most cases, these stories are tweaked by the generation that possesses them. These oral histories create a collective memory through communication. There is no bind to specific facts, and the way in which people articulate their own perception of the story transcends back in generations. This encourages collective memory to be enhanced by the analysis of stories from a myriad of perspectives.

Cultural memory has an end to its horizon—there are fixed ideas in this type of memory by events and landmarks with historical dates. The intergenerational stories that I encounter by family members crystallize the commonalities between different types of memories. I am able to distinguish between perception and intergenerational memory, as I take into account the time period and relationships my family members had with their respective surroundings. For example, “The Rape of Nanking” is a non-fiction book written by Iris Chang discussing the tragic 1937 Nanking Massacre in which 300,000 Chinese civilians were murdered by the Imperial Japanese Army. In 1931, the Japanese invaded the province of Manchuria in China seeking to collect raw materials and resources in order to save the economic health after the Great Depression from 1929

to 1939. Matsui Iwane, the commanding general of the Japanese Central China Front Army, ordered the destruction of Nanking.

Following the destruction of Nanking, in 1940, the war turned into a stalemate. China could not evict Japan and Japan could not declare victory. When western intervention against Japan occurred for the purpose of economic sanctions, Japan invaded Pearl Harbor which instigated World War II. This is why the Nanking Massacre of 1937 is essential to the history of not only the United States and the start of World War II, but also to China and other relevant countries that were a part of this genocide. The event was not only a catalyst for future historical events that affected the future wellbeing of the United States, but it also created conflicts between two powerful countries, China and Japan. My grandparents sat in their rooms trying to focus on homework, or more realistically, take care of their siblings, because schools and homelands were being bombed in the distance during World War II. As a result of these historical events, my family members fled to different countries, such as Brazil and the United States.

As I have grown older, I have observed the habits and the ways in which my grandparents analyze situations from the effects of experiencing war. Many, but not all immigrant families share parallels between their values. The significance of maintaining frugality, not wasting food, and receiving an enriching education are ideas that have become apparent to me. My great grandfather owned a peppermint business that sustained my grandma's eight siblings, and watching that cherished business crumble to shreds after bomb invasions is still a sensitive subject. In accordance with this, my grandparents' morals from all of these experiences have been passed down to the next generations.

Although my parents are very affectionate towards me—sheltering me in love and support—my relationship with my grandparents is slightly different. Food unites my family. The tangy smell

of Maa's *Hong Shao Rou* or Popo's presence inviting the satisfying fermented essence of homemade *Jiaozi* is a symbol of love. Whenever I am on the phone with my grandparents, their way of showing love is through telling me that they are going to take me out to one of my favorite restaurants, cook with me, or cook for me. The labor that goes into cooking a homemade meal for our family to enjoy through our shared love for food and discourse is something special to our family culture. There is a mark of solace in sitting down at a table and facing everyone with wafts of flavorful food steaming in our faces. The art of cultivating food is one of the most profound definitions of what it means to be Chinese according to my family. Food is like a tapestry of love, interwoven with *Wu* or *Kuan* cooking techniques over multiple generations that have been embellished with respect for tradition.

Through family, role models, memory, history, and food, I have found empowerment in my story. I see my identity through a series of events, contorting themselves into a distinctive spectacle of joy, acknowledgement, culture, and family stories in my mind. My narrative is built upon multiple stories and ideas, but I grip onto my agency tightly as the exposure to my history has developed my character into who I am today.

References

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BBC Culture (Ed.). (2023). *To the people, food is heaven*. BBC. Retrieved April 20, 2023, from https://www.bbc.com/storyworks/culture/food-culture-in-china/to-the-people-food-is-heaven?utm_source=BBC-news&utm_medium=Elsewhere&utm_campaign=food-culture-in-china&utm_content=Article01

This article is about the power of food. Food is very important in my family-- it is a symbol of love. In relation to my research in memory and immigration, another branch of my grandparents' unique love is through food. They may not be able to fully express their love through words and affection, but the labor that goes into preparing elaborate meals represents their love. I thought it would be interesting to further explore the history of food, and its symbols to people at large.

Coontz, S., Parson, M., & Raley, G. (Eds.). (2008). *American Families: A Multicultural Reader: Vol. 2. American Families* (Second ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/9780415958202>

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Council on Foundations. Retrieved April 20, 2023, from <https://cof.org/content/effects-family-culture-family-foundations>

The first component of identity in my paper is family. This website educates readers on the history of community cultures. There is a great deal of information about organizational cultures, and the idea of norms, values, and traditions. Additionally, the article highlights the power of culture, and defines what that word truly means in a family. I was able to make connections between the history of family cultures to the ways in which I view the world. My morals and values have all stemmed from my parents, and it is because my family made up the first part of my identity.

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- Hong, C. P. (2021). *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. One World Trade. <https://doi.org/9781984820389>
- In 2021, I read *Minor Feelings* for my Humanities class. At first, I viewed the book as an average school assignment, but I later realized that this novel changed the trajectory in the ways I saw identity. Since I am researching the complexities of identity, I wanted to talk about where my passion for this topic arose. Not only does this novel acknowledge the many cruel histories of Asian people, but it also answers the many questions we have had. Lastly, this book empowers Asian people to use their voice and claim justice and agency over our identities.
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I am currently reading this book so I can use the information to help compose my section on my grandparents. The manner in which my grandparents show their love is very different from how my parents, brother, and I do. This is largely because of the fact that they are immigrants. This book explains the history of Chinese immigration in the U.S., and offers a lens into some of the ways immigrants may view the world due to their backgrounds. It is important to understand the general background of Chinese immigration and its effects in order to understand the dynamics in my relationships with my grandparents.

Thompson, R. F., & Madigan, S. A. (2005). *Memory: The Key to Consciousness*. Joseph Henry Press. <https://doi.org/0309093112>

This book lends itself to my project because it contains information about the science of memory. I am researching the idea of memory over generations, and how that plays a role in the development of our unique identities. Through the information in this book, I am able to gain knowledge on the science behind memory, and how it affects our minds.

There are many different types of memory, all encompassed in one singular mind.

However, how do we distinguish the individual significance of each of these memories?

Wright, et. all, K. E. (2021, January 25). *The impact that cultural food security has on identity and well-being in the second-generation U.S. American minority college students*.

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