Internalized Chinatown: Trauma and its Effects on People of Color

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Many people who choose to become parents have the best intentions – to nurture, teach, and raise this child to their fullest potential. However, parents can often be faced with the most impossible of circumstances, leading them to difficult decisions for the sake of their family. Immigration comes with complex consequences, both for the immigrant and their children. Specifically, people from Asia have been restricted the most by the United States government, which passed several forms of legislation to curb their immigration. When it comes to the story of Willis Wu in *Interior Chinatown*, we see a man driven by the need to be better than his parents, who he loves while also acknowledging their objective failures in Hollywood. Willis is the child of two Taiwanese immigrants, working in the industry in demeaning roles like Generic Asian Man and Striving Immigrant. Willis is working toward the success of one day being Kung Fu Guy, the best role any Asian man can seemingly get. However, throughout the book we see the effects his parents and their immigration had on him, his personality, and his view of race. Although Dorothy and Ming-Chen Wu wanted the best for their son when they moved to America, they played a major part in the obstacles that Willis creates for himself through the novel.

Before discussing Willis and his parents, this essay describes a lot of terms that many people do not understand the complexity of, specifically generational and immigrant trauma. Generational trauma, experienced by one generation and transmitted to the following, manifests through a variety of mechanisms, such as cultural norms, behaviors, and biological changes. Through cultural norms, beliefs, and behaviors,

trauma experienced by one generation may be passed on to the following. Yvonne Y. Kwan, in *New Directions for Higher Education,* says, “More than 40 years since the large waves of Southeast Asian refugees migrated to the United States, we are still witnessing the intergenerational effects of war and trauma on younger generations that were born and raised in the United States.” Stories, customs, and ways of thinking are passed down from one generation to the next through cultural transmission as well. Trauma can also be communicated behaviorally through the actions of parents and other caregivers. A parent who has suffered trauma, for instance, may be more inclined to overprotect their children or to display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can have a detrimental effect on the development of the child. Studies have revealed that traumatic experiences can alter DNA in a way that is handed down through the generations. This process, known as epigenetic inheritance, can produce mental and physical symptoms that are comparable to those of the original trauma sufferer. Discrimination, racism, and other systemic issues can all be carriers of trauma. These elements may contribute to the perpetuation of trauma and the development of conditions that put future generations at greater risk of trauma. The consequences of generational trauma can be numerous and extensive.

When it comes to immigrant trauma, pre-migration, migration, and post-migration traumas are only a few of the many traumas that immigrants may endure. Traumatic events that may have happened in the immigrant's place of origin before they relocated are referred to as pre-migration trauma. This can involve war, persecution, political violence, or other types of trauma or violence. Experiences that may take place during the migration process include long journeys, being separated from family members, and

being exposed to violence, exploitation, or abuse while in transit. Incidents that may take place after an immigrant has reached their target country are referred to as post-migration trauma. In addition to social isolation, poverty, and restricted access to resources and services, this can also involve racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice. These various traumas can all have a significant negative effect on immigrants' mental health and general wellbeing. As a result of their experiences, immigrants may display signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. They might also experience difficulties adjusting to their new surroundings and assimilating into their new communities. In a journal article for *Children's Literature in Education* detailing the plight of immigrants' children, Weimin Mo and Wenju Shen say, "These children seldom see people look, eat, or pray like them. Because of their distinctive phenotype, they are often treated as 'forever foreigners' in this traditionally racialized society. They often feel they don't belong to any communities. This experience is painful because they were born in this country and consider American identity as their birthright." In order to deal with the emotional, psychological, and physical effects of their experiences, children who endured racial trauma may need specific support and services. It's critical to validate children's emotions and experiences. This means acknowledging the pain that has been caused to them and providing a secure environment in which they can communicate their feelings and opinions. Give children who have suffered racial trauma access to mental health resources. Therapy or counseling can help these children to process their experiences and come up with coping mechanisms. Making sure that mental health services are trauma-informed and culturally sensitive is crucial. Children who have

suffered racial trauma may have challenges feeling like they belong and having a sense of who they are. Giving kids information about racial identity and pride can aid in their personal growth and prevent them from internalizing negative ideas about their race or ethnicity. Children need safe spaces to discuss their experiences with racism and prejudice in a way that makes them feel understood and supported, like affinity organizations, cultural clubs, or other settings where kids can meet people who have similar experiences. In order to avoid future trauma, it is imperative to address the underlying causes of racism and prejudice. This involves speaking up for legislation that supports equity, inclusion, and educating students about systematic racism.

It is a well-defended idea that parents have the most influence on their children. Everything parents say and do is observed by their children, for better or for worse. Of course, nobody is expected to be constantly perfect when in the presence of their children; it would probably lead to apathy which is harmful to a child's emotional development. However, when harmful things that affect our behavior are internalized, parents unknowingly pass that onto their children, which is often referred to as generational trauma. Lois Tyson talks more on internalization in her book *Using Critical Theory*, saying, "We might not know the specific source of our emotional problems–we might not even know we have such problems–because we tend to repress our most distressing experiences, push them into the unconscious, which is the psychological storehouse of painful experiences we don't want to remember." She goes on to explain how the behaviors we display due to trauma are often seemingly irrational, but can usually be helped with processing and healing from psychological damage. When it comes to *Interior Chinatown*, without a doubt, Willis Wu's mother, called Dorothy, is a

key part of his childhood. When discussing death, Willis talks about when his mother's characters would be killed off of shows. Willis says, "Some of the happiest times of your life were when your mother was dead, because you knew she would be home for six weeks, you would have her all to yourself in the afternoons (Yu, p. 130)." When parents are away from their children for long periods of time, the attachment begins to deteriorate. At the same time, absence harms the child, as parents are their anchors socially and emotionally.

When it comes to Dorothy's background, we see two major concepts from Tyson's book represented: the family and intersectionality. We see Dorothy's connection to her family depicted by her tumultuous relationship with her sister, Angela. Before leaving for Chinatown where she settles down, Dorothy lived in Alabama with her sister while she worked as a nurse's assistant in 1969 before being kicked out and sent to live with other sister in Ohio. Years later, she is called back to Alabama to help her sister, who is now disabled and unable to care for herself. Dorothy takes care of her for nearly a year until Angela's death (Yu, 134-138). Dorothy is indebtedly dutiful to her sister, for better or for worse. Tyson describes family relationships as "...the most important source of our early emotional experiences... because it is in the family that our sense of self and our way of relating to others are first established (85)." Dorothy's loyalty only exists because their dynamic has never changed. The two have become accustomed to Angela's rules and chores, even when it nears cruelty. During Dorothy's tenure as a nurse's assistant, she is sexually harassed (and even groped), both because of her body and race. The disturbing dialogue reads, "Hey come here, hey you China doll, with the porcelain skin and almond eyes, let me get a look at those slim

thighs," before a rejection cause "entitled anger (134)." This disturbing quote depicts Dorothy's intersectionality, which is the relationships between oppressed traits in a single person (Tyson 152). When it comes to Dorothy, she is being oppressed for being Asian and a woman, not one or the other. Because Willis is a cisgender, straight Asian man, his mother is one of the only detailed depictions of intersectionality in the novel, but she is an incredibly compelling character; she has a story and a family, and she proves that mothers *can* have both.

Willis's father, Ming-Chen has a bit more violent past than Dorothy. He lived through the genocide of thousand of Taiwanese citizens, under the Nationalist rule of Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek. He was seven when he watched soldiers kill his father and take the deed to their land (Yu, 140-143). Years later, Ming-Chen abruptly leaves Taiwan for America and arrives in Mississippi after a four-day bus trip, where he rents a home with five other graduate students of different ethnic backgrounds—Korean, Japanese, Punjabi Sikh, and Taiwanese. Students and teachers at the university cruelly refer to each of them as "Chinamen" and other derogatory terms (Yu, p. 144-146). Despite their ethnicities, these graduate students are grouped together as belonging to the same social category. However, as a result of this generalization and perhaps also as a result of how the students relate to one another outside of their being victimized, Ming-Chen is able to clearly see, after a racist assaults his friend Allen Chen, the ways in which all five of them are "Asian Men," a term that is used to exclude Asian people from society and confine their lives to specific roles in America. Ming-Chen's storyline is an amazing representation of immigrant trauma. Yu utilizes historical events

combined with a compelling sidebar on Allen to provide an amazing view into the life of a “Struggling Immigrant.”

After everything, Dorothy and Ming-Chen fall in love and create our talented protagonist Willis. He is a shining example of his father’s knowledge but his mother’s ambition, as well as the causes behind those characteristics. With the knowledge of the effects of different traumas and concepts to decipher characters motives, readers can get an enticing look into the psyche of a fictional character. Willis, like many of the characters in *Interior Chinatown* are products of their environment, which means readers can grow their knowledge to create deeper meanings for these characters.

Works Cited

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