**Language, Culture, and Identity Socratic Seminar**

**“How to Pronounce Knife” and “Search for My Tongue”**

In our globalized world, each of us finds ourselves—in big and small ways—living with differences. Migration and immigration are the most visible examples. Today nearly 200 million people and their children are living in countries outside of their birthplaces. That experience has an impact upon the identities of immigrants and non-immigrants alike. Cultural psychologist Carola Suárez-Orozco writes that for children of immigrants, ‘the task of immigration…is creating a transcultural identity.’ She explains, ‘These youth must creatively fuse aspects of two or more cultures—the parental tradition and the new culture or cultures. In so doing, they synthesize an identity that does not require them to choose between cultures but incorporates traits of both cultures.’

**Instructions:** In order to prepare for this seminar, please read the short story “How to Pronounce Knife”, the excerpt on “Why Thammavongsa wrote ‘How to Pronounce Knife’”, and Sujata Bhatt’s Poem “Search for My Tongue”. Then answer the questions in detailed point form as well as brainstorm any other ideas or questions you may want to pose in the discussion.

[**Why Souvankham Thammavongsa wrote “How to Pronounce Knife**](https://www.cbc.ca/books/souvankham-thammavongsa-s-stories-explore-the-diversity-of-the-immigrant-experience-1.5580343)**”:**

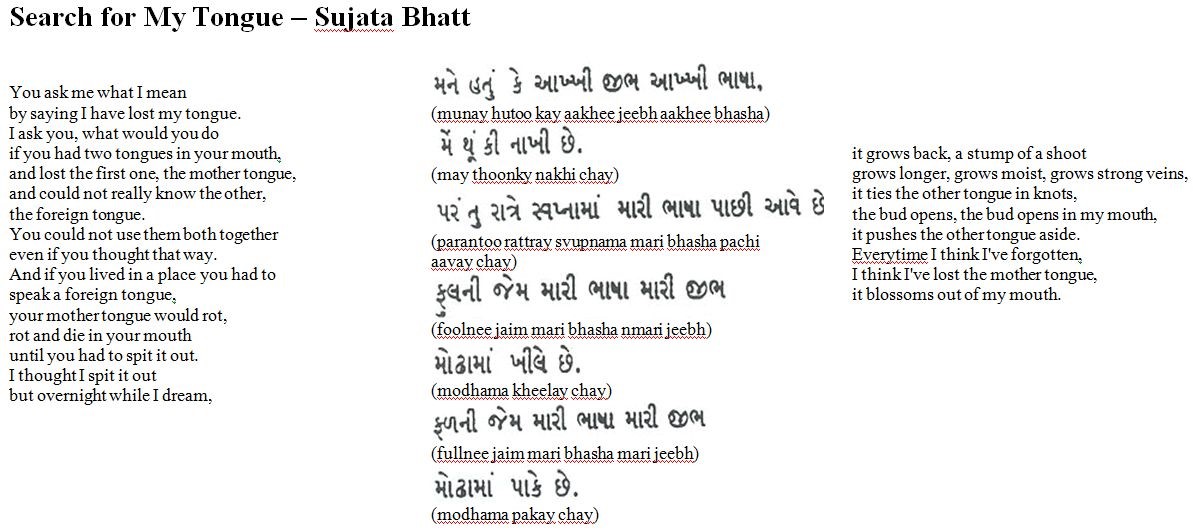
"I knew that whenever we encounter stories of immigrants and refugees, they are always sad and tragic. And rightly so; they are. But I feel like that image is very narrow about who we really are. We're also fun and ferocious and hilarious. And also we can be ungrateful and there should be room for that. I wanted the story to address that.

"I did think a lot about family, love, work and laughter as things that the stories would deal with. They're all very different but I also wanted them to orbit around each other, to remind each other.

"I wanted to write about an immigrant child in a different way that we often encounter them in literature. In the opening story, there's a child who gets made fun of for her lunch. It's very typical.

"But what we don't see is defiance, which in my experience that's who I really am. If somebody picked on me, or somebody tried to shame me, I defied or changed that.

"I wanted a story that gives space to how I would react in real life."



“How to Pronounce Knife” Questions:

1. What is the POV of this story? Why do you think the author chose this?

* The POV is third person limited omniscient.
* Author chose this so that the story can be generalized and reflective of a broader group of people (all immigrants or people who have had to change their culture due to moving to a new country).
* If the author used first person or second person (I.e. “I” or “you”) then only the author or the person reading the story is implied to be going through the events of the story. Third person (I.e. “a girl” or “she”) is much more broad and can refer to pretty much anyone, thus allowing a clearer connection to be made from the events of the story to real life.
* Limited omniscient so that the reader can know what the protagonist is feeling like, her thoughts and ideas, and ultimately sympathize with her.
* It is important to note that even though the story is in third person, the protagonist is never named and is only referred to by pronouns (except in dialogue).

1. What is the value of a name? How do you feel about a character that is not named (in her own language)? How does this affect the story?

* The value of a name is ultimately a sense of identity, a sense of distinction, and a sense of individuality.
* It can be thought of the one thing that symbolizes our character as whole
* In the story, the girl’s name is Joy (as seen in the dialogue). However, this is not her Lao name.
* Her not being named in her own language makes me feel that she is rejected and alienated from her culture.
* The story is about changing from one culture to another, so Joy not being named in her own language is perhaps representative of how she has had to give up her Lao background to adapt to the new society she is in.
* Question: Is there any significance behind Miss Choi’s name? Choi is a common Korean family name, and the story is assumed to take place in Western society (most likely Canada). Why is Joy’s Lao name not used when Miss Choi’s Korean name is used?

1. Find two symbols in the story and discuss their significance.

* The word “knife” symbolizes the difficulty Joy and her dad (and immigrants in general) have trying to adapt to a new society.
* They have trouble pronouncing it because they are not used to the language.
* It’s not just the whole word that symbolizes something.
* The “k” in “knife” is of especially particular note. Both Joy and her dad pronounce it incorrectly with the “k” sound when it is silent. Later, Joy “insisted the letter *k* was not silent” in the office, and that it was there, “it should have a sound.”
* The “k” could be thought of as Joy and her family's Lao background. They think that it should have a sound and should not be silent, meaning that they think they should be able to be Lao at the same time in Canada. But this isn’t the case, since the “k” is indeed silent.
* It is important to note that nobody knows why this is the case either: “and none of them, with all their lifetimes of reading and good education, could explain it.” The phenomenon of cultural assimilation is implied to not even be forced or on purpose.
* The meaning of the word “knife” also has significance. A knife cuts things, and it could be thought of as cutting away Joy’s Lao background.
* The sign blocking Joy except her face on photo day
* Significance lies not just in the sign, but in the reason for why the sign is significant (very meta).
* The reason why the sign is significant is because it had to be used to “hide the dirt on the child’s shoes” and hide her different dress from the others.
* The reason for why she had a different appearance is because her mother threw out the note probably reminding her of a dress code for photo day.
* This habit of throwing out notes is unique to the family’s different cultural background, since because they are immigrants from a foreign country, they probably have a hard time reading English and don’t want to bother.
* Thus, when Joy wears the different dress to photo day, this symbolizes her Lao background.
* But it is blocked by the sign. A full circle showing how the sign symbolizes censorship of backgrounds apart from a Canadian one.

1. Sound is important in this story. The silent letter at the front in the word knife, the way sound lasts only for a short while and disappears, or how sounds can often stand in for meaning. Why is sound a concern in this story?

* Already discussed a little in question 3 symbolism for the word “knife”.
* The meaning conveyed by sound (spoken words) is more prone to being interpreted the wrong way than written words. The two share the same characteristic of grammar and sentence structure and so on, but pronunciation is arguably harder than spelling.
* Immigrants who often have an accent or do not know how to pronounce certain words, so they are especially vulnerable to being misinterpreted.
* This can be seen when Joy receives backlash from another girl when she pronounces “knife” wrong. She is mocked: the girl “rolled her eyes as if there was nothing easier in the world to know.” Since she pronounces it wrong due to her being from a different cultural background, in a sense she is mocked for her culture.
* The poor enunciation of many immigrants often weakens their ethos when they are speaking. Their voices are often not heard or disregarded.

1. How does love function in this story? Family love, self love, etc.

* The child shows love to her parents by trying to put as less stress on them as possible, trying not to worry them about her.
* How she doesn’t tell her mom that she wore the wrong dress for photo day
* How she doesn’t tell her dad that the pronunciation he taught her for “knife” is wrong, and how she doesn’t tell him about her resulting experience in the office
* How she realizes that she would have to find out a lot by herself
* The parents also show lover to the child through simple things, such as giving her food and a home to sleep in even though they are struggling themselves.
* They also want her to live a better life than them. Her father tells her, “Don’t speak Lao and don’t tell anyone you are Lao.” They realize that while it is too late for them to adapt fully to Canada, their child still has a chance.
* Despite being in a foreign land and culture, love bonds the family together. Even though the family is “alone” in their community, the individuals are not. They can get through everything together.
* Joy also shows some self-love when she stands up for herself by insisting that the “k” in “knife” is silent.

1. Why doesn’t the protagonist tell her father about the correct way to pronounce knife?

* She cares about her father’s dignity and self-esteem. She doesn’t want to stress him out about her.
* She realizes “how small and shrunken he seems.” She doesn’t want to make him feel even smaller by informing him that he was wrong about how “knife” was pronounced, how he has taught his own daughter the wrong thing, and how her daughter has been affected by it.
* She may also just not want to show her dad that she knows more than him.

1. Write a theme statement for the story.

* “Adapting to a new culture is not only a difficult and arduous process, but it also requires giving up the past.”

“The Search for my Tongue” Questions:

I translated the Gurjati part (using Google Translate):

I had a whole tongue, a whole language,

What I have blown the key.

But at night my language comes back in a dream

My tongue my tongue like a call

Flourishes in the mouth

My tongue like fruit

Ripens in the mouth

1. Why does Bhatt use two languages (English and Gurjati)? What is the effect of that?

* One of Bhatt’s main points is that she has a diverse identity because she speaks two languages. By only including English, it is harder to believe her. However, she also includes the other language she speaks, Gurjati, which gives her ethos and us as the audience an easier time trusting her.
* It also shows how her mother tongue “blossoms out of [her] mouth” everytime she thinks she forgot about it. The seemingly random Gurjati inserted in between the English text proves just this.

1. In the poem, ‘The Search for my Tongue’, Bhatt uses the image of two tongues as a way to think about her multiple identities. In the poem, is there a conflict between the two tongues?

* Bhatt states explicitly that her two tongues fight each other: “[Bhatt’s mother tongue] grows back, a stump of a shoot grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins, it ties the other tongue in knots.”
* Her conflict between her two tongues represents her conflict between her two identities, like many immigrants or foreigners have when trying to adapt to another culture.
* Bhatt juxtaposes one tongue with another by inserting Gurjati text in the middle of English text. Whether this is a conflict is determined by whether the reader understands both Gurjati and English.
* Based on the translation, the Gurjati text is talking about very similar things to the English text, so the two do not really conflict in this sense
* However, if the reader only knows one language, then the random other text may seem like a conflict

1. To what extent is that struggle natural or inevitable (does it always have to happen)? Is it a difficulty or can it be a source of strength?

* I don’t think the struggle with the tongues is inevitable. I can speak Mandarin but if I am forbidden from doing so or I shouldn’t speak it, I just consciously choose to speak English. It’s not like in an English conversation I’m forced to suddenly blurt out some Mandarin sentences and then come back to English.
* What I think Bhatt is referring to though is not the tongues. It’s her entire identity. Then I definitely think this struggle is inevitable; it is natural that she will struggle between choosing one culture over the other. My parents faced this when they moved from China to Canada, and I experienced a bit of the struggle as well (though I was very young).
* It is mostly a difficulty because of the struggle and conflict with oneself’s identity (not feeling like belonging in one single group => not feeling like belonging anywhere).
* “I ask you, what would you do if you had two tongues in your mouth, and lost the first one, the mother tongue, and could not really know the other, the foreign tongue.”
* It can definitely also be a source of strength though. After all, diversity is obviously important. Connections with more people, new ideas, experiences, and perspectives, etc.

1. Carola Suárez-Orozco believes that transcultural identities give immigrant youth an advantage in a globalized world because they can maintain ‘two tongues.’ What do you think she means? What advantages might she be talking about?

* As a youth who has a transcultural identity and maintains two tongues, I can agree with her. In many societies nowadays, it is not homogeneous, there is a lot of diversity, especially in Canada. Furthermore, more and more countries are developing and becoming more prominent in the world. Thus, to be able to connect with the most people, it is important to know more than one language and culture.
* Connection is the biggest advantage of having two tongues and a transcultural identity.
* I remember when I was volunteering as an assistant ski instructor and I was able to help translate for a Chinese woman who didn’t know how to speak English and help her get up the mountain. The supervisors later praised me for my excellent customer service.
* Knowing and being familiar with another culture can also help to avoid being rude or impolite accidentally (thus, paving the way for more connection).

1. Write a theme statement for the poem.

* “It is extremely difficult, or even impossible, to get rid of one’s previous identity.”

Storytelling and Identity Questions:

1. In what way does this story subvert the typical immigrant narrative?

* Thammavongsa writes herself that “I knew that whenever we encounter stories of immigrants and refugees, they are always sad and tragic. And rightly so; they are. But I feel like that image is very narrow about who we really are. We're also fun and ferocious and hilarious. And also we can be ungrateful and there should be room for that. I wanted the story to address that.”
* In the story, there is hardly any gratefulness expressed by Joy and her family for moving to Canada. In most immigrant stories however, there is usually always gratefulness expressed for being able to move to a new country, even despite the difficulties and hardships of adapting to a new culture.
* Thammavongsa also writes that "I wanted to write about an immigrant child in a different way that we often encounter them in literature. In the opening story, there's a child who gets made fun of for her lunch. It's very typical. But what we don't see is defiance, which in my experience that's who I really am. If somebody picked on me, or somebody tried to shame me, I defied or changed that.”
* Unlike most other immigrant stories, Joy shows a sense of defiance and self-pride, like insisting that the “k” in “knife” is not silent or telling other children who teased her about her lunch that “You wouldn’t know a good thing even if five hundred pounds of it came and sat on your face!” She doesn’t as easily let her background be her weakness.

1. What does this story show us about the power and importance of storytelling?
2. These stories feel real, yet we are told they are fiction. Does it matter to you to know what the real story is behind them or if they come or do not come from the author’s real life? Do you think such knowing could take away the magic of not knowing?
3. Suárez-Orozco says that the task of immigration is to fuse a transcultural identity. What does she mean?
4. According to Carola Suárez-Orozco: For the children of immigrants the task is to braid together[,] into a flexible sense of self, elements of the parent culture, the new culture they are navigating along with an emerging globalized youth culture. For those in the host society, the challenge is to broaden the cultural horizon to incorporate the changing perspectives, habits, and potentials of its diverse newcomers. Have you encountered these challenges in your own life? How have you seen instances where they have been successfully overcome?

|  | **Extending** | **Proficient** | **Developing** | **Emerging** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Preparation* | \*Notes are thorough and include textual evidence  \*Insightful additional questions/comments | \*Notes are detailed but lacking textual evidence  \*Some additional questions/comments | \*Notes are lacking detail  \*few additional questions/comments | \*Notes not completed  \*No questions/additional comments |
| *Conduct* | \*Patient with differing opinions.  \*Asks for clarification.  \*Brings others into the dialogue.  \*Very focused on the dialogue. | \*Respectful.  \*Comments, but does not attempt to involve others.  \*Generally focused. | \*Participates but shows impatience.  \*Some focus.  \*Engages in “sidebar” conversations. | \*Disrespectful.  \*Argumentative.  \*Does not participate. |
| *Speaking* | \*Speaks so all participants can hear.  \*Articulate.  \*Takes a leadership role without monopolizing the discussion. | \*Speaks so most can hear  \*Attempts to move on to new ideas.  \*Tends to “ramble on” after making a point. | \*Speaks too softly.  \*Needs prompting to get involved.  \*Has no sustainable point; uses “sound bites.”  \*Monopolizes the discussion. | \*Reluctant to speak.  \*Comments do not support point. |
| *Reasoning* | \*Relates topic to outside knowledge and other topics.  \*Makes connections between own thoughts and others’.  \*Willing to take an alternate viewpoint.  \*Asks questions to further dialogue. | \*Makes limited connections to others’ ideas.  \*Some intriguing points that merit reaction.  \*Some references to text. | \*Accurate on minor points, but misses the main point.  \* “talking off the top of your head.”  \*Refuses to acknowledge alternate viewpoints. | \*Illogical comments.  \*Ignores the movement of the seminar. |
| *Listening* | \* Always actively attends to what others say as evidenced by regularly building on, clarifying, or responding to their comments. | \* Usually listens well and takes steps to check comprehension by asking clarifying and probing questions, and making connections to earlier comments. | \* Does not regularly listen well as indicated by the repetition of comments or questions presented earlier | \*Behavior frequently reflects a failure to listen or attend to the discussion as indicated by repetition of comments and questions, off-task activities. |