Phoebe Huang

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Dear Readers,

First and foremost, thank you all for your valuable advice and guidance during my workshop. I definitely learned a lot from your comments and I tried my best to incorporate some of these suggestions into this revision. My hopes for this revision are to examine the inexistence of a true melting pot due to physical limitations barring individuals from truly choosing among identity categories. Although in my first draft, my ideas were not very clear even to me, I felt that overall I solidified my thought process this time around. I think that this was achieved when I clarified a motive (that people think America is a melting pot, but perhaps this is not true) and thesis for this paper. In my draft I mostly just had a thesis topic rather than a statement that supported a specific claim of what and how. Following your advice, my new thesis takes a stance and gives direction to the rest of my paper.

One of the things I worked on was interweaving the three secondary texts that I use better rather than having a chunky succession of summaries. After orienting the reader a little about the story “Amritsar” itself, I give another sort of orienting paragraph to show the connections that the three texts make and how they relate to the melting pot ideology. It is only after I first do this that I begin to analyze the texts separately in depth. I tried to show how Sollors reinforces the melting pot ideology, whereas Kallen contradicts this idea of unification and blending by saying that people retain their cultural differences. His idea that people cannot change who their grandfathers were then extends to Hollinger’s claim that people can still choose which grandfather with whom to identify. Moreover, Hollinger interacts with Sollors’ text by stating a similar voluntary rather than prescribed affiliation to ethno-racial ties, but still diverges from the melting pot ideology that has become almost universal. Another aspect of my paper that I sought to change was how I oriented my readers. Especially in terms of my intro, I did not do a good job of setting up the context before I started analyzing the story. I hope that you will agree that the orienting was executed better in this revision. I also rethought some of my analysis of evidence, such as whether or not Gurukha and Ajay actually feel cultural ties to India. Although in my draft I tried to prove that they felt Indian still, I reevaluated this assessment and actually argued the opposite, which now makes more sense.

One of the things that I struggled with in writing this revision was figuring out the structure of my paper that would best articulate my argument. I spent a lot of time thinking about how my argument would flow. Also, I am still unsure if my usage of Williams as a lens is sufficient. Though I tried to incorporate the terms into my writing, I don’t know if I should have used his text more throughout my paper. Anyway, what I would like you to focus on most when you read my revision is if the different components of my paper come together to form a cohesive argument. How well does my motive set up your interest in my thesis, and do I analyze my evidence well enough to support my claim? Thank you for reading my work!

Sincerely,

Phoebe

Descent Without Consent: Rethinking the Melting Pot of America

In Jess Row’s short story entitled “Amritsar,” Gurukha and his second-generation son Ajay contend with the struggle of assimilating into American culture despite readily embracing societal norms and practices. Within the context of the post-9/11 panic, when the way in which one culturally identifies oneself remains only secondary to what one looks like and is thus perceived to be by the rest of society, the experiences of this Sikh-American family allow for a modern reexamination of the ideal of voluntary cultural association and, more importantly, its relation to the traditional melting pot ideology ascribed to America. As Row’s narrative draws to its arguably unresolved conclusion, both Gurukha and Ajay are presented with the choice of remaining loyal to their ethnic heritage or embracing Americanism at last—or are they?

Gurukha and Ajay, as characters of Row’s design, represent only one family enveloped in the emerging cultural dilemma facing modern immigrants and their children, in particular those of non-European origin. To borrow the terminology of Raymond Williams, cultural process is driven by the continuous struggle of “dominant, residual, and emergent” forces vying for jurisdiction over the ways in which a society operates. He characterizes the dynamic relations between these three classifications by presenting the idea of a prevailing, or dominant, cultural mindset that coexists with earlier (residual) elements of the past and new (emergent) constituents working in opposition with the present (121-122). The applicable language of Williams’ discussion lends itself well to the analysis of the cultural processes present in other texts as well, creating a base for debating the validity of the conventionally termed melting pot of America.

One such work examining the complexities of American nationality arises from Werner Sollors’ *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. Defending the ethnic melting pot, he upholds the “rebirth of immigrants as American infants” by the process of naturalization and the shedding of past ancestral ties to begin a new life (76). Sollors draws on the theories of other writers, including Horace Kallen, to substantiate his claims. While the image of a melting pot suggests the removal of ancestral ties in identity formation through cultural unity, Kallen believes that immigrants retain their differences and must instead work together in harmony as distinct groups. Nearly a century later, David Hollinger’s “Haley’s Choice and the Ethno-racial Pentagon” rethinks Kallen’s argument by positing the ability of immigrants to choose Americanization in a post-ethnic world that allows people to cross the bounds of ethnicity. He moves away from strict identity categorizations, echoing Sollors’ principle of descent by consent yet not entirely subscribing to the traditional melting pot. The interaction of “Amritsar” with the analytical voices of Sollors, Kallen, and Hollinger ultimately forces a reevaluation of this societal model, suggesting that voluntary rather than prescribed ancestral affiliation fails as a realistic option for American immigrants, at least for those excluded from the Euro-American categorization due to inherent physical limitations that determine how one is perceived.

Indeed, these physical limitations play a predominant role in Row’s historically based work, which explores the tensions between dominant and emergent that exist in a modern-day multicultural America. The story is told from the perspective of Gurukha, a Sikh Indian immigrant who has established a new life in the States as a middle-class radiologist (Row 8). Considering Row’s use of fiction to portray an increasingly common cultural process emerging in American society with the influx of diverse immigrants, to what extent does the depiction of Gurukha and his son Ajay’s efforts to become part of the dominant American culture interact with the melting pot ideology? In his book, Sollors reaffirms the common idea of America as an ethnic “‘pot’ in which immigrants could ‘melt’ in order to be reborn” (77). The melting pot has been used to describe how foreigners shed their past origins to assimilate into America, uniting peoples of different ethnicities into one effective group. He also emphasizes how “citizenship by volitional allegiance was modeled upon the consent principle. Immigrants could thus be portrayed as cultural newlyweds, more enthusiastically and loyally in love with the country of their choice than citizens-by-descent” (74). Americanization into the melting pot thus allows immigrants to voluntarily embrace a new beginning in a new world.

On the other hand, Kallen refutes the possibility of unison put forth by the melting pot. In motivating his article, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot,” he characterizes the traditional notion of Americanization, which overlaps with Sollors’ idea of the melting pot, as “the adoption of English speech, of American clothes and manners, of the American attitude in politics. It connotes the fusion of the various bloods, and a transmutation by the ‘miracle of assimilation’ … into beings similar in background, traditions, outlook, and spirit” (192). However, he goes against this idea of “a unison of ethnic types” to suggest instead “a multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind” (219-220), a metaphor he uses relate the idea of America as a collection of diverse but harmonious groups united by the democratic ideals of America’s founding fathers. Kallen contends that individuals are ultimately tied to ancestral roots. Even the title of Kallen’s essay itself, democracy *versus* the melting pot, conveys the inability for the melting pot to coexist with American ideals. He states, “Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, … [but] they cannot change their grandfathers. Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, in order to cease being Jews or Poles or Anglo-Saxons, would have to cease to be” (220).

Initially, it seems that Gurukha and Ajay’s lifestyles would contradict this grandfather limitation, namely the inability to leave behind innate identity fixtures despite becoming a part of American culture. Having made the decision to leave India behind, Gurukha effectively turns his back on his native homeland and willingly adopts the new cultural mindset of America. As the epigraph starting off the story describes, “Gurukha didn’t want a pistol in his house. He wanted to move on, to be done with India, and with Amritsar” (Row 1). The immigrant is portrayed as fully inclined to become a new American in contrast to his old friend Gopal, who remains in India. Whereas Gopal remains fixated on vengeance for the massacre, determined to fight for a balance of power in India “from the bottom up,” Gurukha distances himself from such radical thinking and scornfully reflects, “India eats us like tinned sardines and spits out the bones” (3). Gurukha’s American mindset is highlighted when his friend says, “You keep that feeling. America is a land of dreamers, no?” (9). Indeed, Gurukha lives among other Americans in a suburban neighborhood, has established himself as a middle-class doctor, and cuts his son’s hair rather than keeping traditional Indian practices.

Ajay similarly comes across as typically American. Subscribing to Row’s use of fishing as a symbolically American activity, Ajay’s self-declared “passion” (10) of fishing exemplifies his full assimilation. Moreover, he attends a prestigious American university as a lacrosse player and is engaged to marry Christine, a “tall, lovely girl, very typically American in some ways” (5) with light skin, rather than following the Indian cultural norm of an arranged marriage to another Indian. In terms of lifestyle choices, neither Ajay nor his father has strong connections to their ancestral Indian ties. By consciously choosing to become American, it would seem, then, that Gurukha and Ajay both serve to challenge this idea of ethno-racial limitation by removing the consideration of cultural ties. Ajay even remarks, “Look, it’s a different world now. *Everyone’s* mixing it up. In 20 years nobody will be anything anymore” (10).

This alternative view, devaluing the differences between cultural associations by actively choosing Americanization, thus informs our reading of David Hollinger’s “Haley’s Choice and the Ethno-racial pentagon,” which offers a post-ethnic ideal in which identity categories are dependent on personal choice even in the face of unalterable ancestry. He claims that “affiliation on the basis of shared descent would be more voluntary than prescribed” (19) in keeping with this ideal, noting that the traditional dilemma restricting individuals to one identity over another now has the possibility of being replaced by a post-ethnic future, where the lines of this pentagon can be voluntarily crossed. According to this view, identity is a choice rather than a prescribed rule based on appearance, contrary to a “history predominantly ethnic in the extent to which each American’s individual destiny has been determined by ancestrally derived distinctions” (Hollinger 20). Hollinger essentially proposes an extension of Kallen’s grandfather limitation by suggesting that although one cannot change grandfathers, one can ultimately decide which grandfather with whom to identify. It also interacts with Sollors’ aforementioned principle of descent by consent in acknowledging individual choice. It nevertheless deviates from the original melting pot ideology by considering the existence of different subsets of ethno-racial groups that retain ancestral ties while also becoming American, forming a hyphenated identity. That is, Gurukha and Ajay are Sikh-Americans by classification but are conferred the same status of Americanization as any other member of the pentagon.

To be sure, this idea of identity as fluid and multiple has been toyed with throughout theoretical discourse. Yet, inasmuch as Hollinger himself acknowledges this post-ethnic future as a mere ideal by stating that “the notion of a post-ethnic America is deeply alien to many features of American and world history” (21), perhaps the idea of voluntary affiliation is not an attainable reality, in terms of the emergent attempting to become part of the dominant through assimilation. What “Amritsar” presents that the other texts fail to account for, most importantly, is that these differences between ethno-racial groups are both important and inherently derived due to not cultural attachments or an internal resistance to assimilation but rather differences in physical appearances that shape others’ perceptions.

As part of the emergent Sikh-American culture, Gurukha and Ajay cannot relinquish their ancestral ties to embrace a new Americanism despite their willingness to be Americanized. They are unable to erase this intrinsic facet of their cultural and physical identity in order to assimilate even though they live a typically American life because their non-European features set them apart from the dominant white society. For example, Ajay experiences the effects of racial discrimination, most notably the “sand nigger” hate crime committed against him and his sister, as the word “appeared one day on Preeta’s locker when she was in the seventh grade” (Row 5). Although he grew up in America just like Christine, Ajay is considered by society to be a Sikh rather than an American like she is, which may be attributed to his perceived descent differentiating him as non-white. Non-European features set immigrants apart from the dominant white culture, causing others to falsely view Ajay as a “towelhead” (11) and Gurukha as “wear[ing] a turban and carry[ing] a knife everywhere” (6) based on their ethnicity.

Row’s story perhaps suggests that the idea of choice in identity is conferred only upon Euro-American immigrants. The post-ethnic ideal of choice in relation to identity categories remains unrealistic for non-white immigrants, a growing category hitherto only a minor aspect of American life but emerging in both importance and size in modern times. In his article, Kallen merely discusses the impact of *Euro*-Americans on the nation, discussing the “immigrants and the children of immigrants” who “are not British, but of all the other European stocks” (191). Keeping in mind the 1915 date of publication, Kallen’s work represents comparatively residual notions that warrant reexamination today, as his theories were created in a time when the influx of immigrants was mainly from various parts of Europe. Not until more recent times have non-white populations begun to play a prevalent role in America. Especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as “Amritsar” demonstrates, non-white immigrants are subject to discrimination based on how they look and where they come from, thereby eliminating any illusion of choice.

In the climax of the story, as Ajay’s and Christine’s families come together for a home-cooked meal, Christine’s father Tom brings Gurukha to the garage and offers him a pistol as self-protection after 9/11. Taken symbolically, the offering of the gun to Gurukha could be read as a pivotal chance for him to fully embrace Americanism, thereby relinquishing his ancestral limitations. Conversely, he rejects the gun, to Tom’s sharp disappointment, which represents Gurukha’s rejection of not only Americanism but also his Sikh cultural ties as he turns his back on both dominant cultures. Accepting the gun as either an American icon or instead as an embodiment of the desire for vengeance after Amritsar is impossible for him as an emergent Sikh-American, relating back to the nonexistence of the melting pot because he cannot become part of and unify with the dominant culture. More importantly, however, this culminating action suggests that he in fact never had a genuine choice. At the same time Tom offers the pistol as a sign of unity and acceptance, he also distinguishes Gurukha by saying, “You people ought to know what you’re up against” (Row 12). Row sets up this intense pressure of choice between an American or Indian identity as an ironic validation of the nonexistence of choice. The choice of accepting the gun emphasizes Gurukha’s differences in a dominant white culture.

The implication of choice as embodied by Tom’s offering of his gun continues to be problematic with regards to Ajay. In this case, the falsity of choice that is possible beyond the ending of “Amritsar”, in which perhaps Tom would attempt to offer the gun as protection to Ajay (Row), seems to offer him an opportunity to become integrated into American society as one of them. In reality, however, if Ajay were to accept Tom’s offered gun, this act would actually serve to reaffirm his differences. The gun epitomizes the estrangement of non-white immigrants from the rest of society because of the reason behind offering Ajay and his family a weapon in the first place—protection. The purpose of the firearm as a defense against possible threat of racial prejudices resulting from the 9/11 terrorist attacks emphasizes the impossibility, at least for the time being, for Ajay to realistically choose to be American over his visibly foreign appearance. As Gurukha’s friend calls to warn him after the tragedy, “Attacks on Sikhs are happening *everywhere*. … When it comes down to it, you know we’re all dirty Arabs to them. Don’t take a chance” (Row 6). Due to his ancestral ties, he has no choice but to accept a marginalized status as a second-generation immigrant son rather than a true American. He, and even his “half-Sikh” children (10), will always be different due to physical limitations.

Considering the inaccuracy of voluntary affiliation to ancestral descent, the dominant melting pot ideology of America warrants reconsideration in its deceptive implications of blending diverse cultures together. As non-white immigrants, both Gurukha and Ajay remain rooted in their physical appearances that cannot realistically be shed. They are perpetually limited by their Indian heritage due to societal instincts, which deem them cultural outsiders based on perceptions of their external appearance, despite their attempts at Americanization. Thus, regarding America as a melting pot in which identity is a choice is not feasible in a modern context for those excluded from the Euro-American category. How can identity be voluntary if ancestral and cultural associations are found at the fundamental essence of one’s being, namely one’s physical features? While this notion appears to offer multiculturalism as an ideal solution in a post-ethnic future, perhaps it is just that—an unattainable ideal.

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