

**From Obsession to Amnesia: Survival in Diaspora
in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*
and Katherine Min's *Secondhand World***

Yauling Hsieh

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Abstract

Both *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Secondhand World* deal with issues of displacement and assimilation that come with immigration. They also address the issues of the fragmented self in the process of assimilation and the search for identity. Published in 1991, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is a novel told in reverse chronological order and narrated from shifting perspectives in the course of fifteen chapters; there is no linear, unifying storyline. The amnesia produced by the diasporic cultures of Latinas gets negotiated within the text through polyphony. The fragmentation of one's personal identity is a serious issue suffered by all four García girls. Their immigration has transformed them into multiple beings, torn between their Dominican and American identities. In their obsessive eagerness to fit in and conform to social expectations in their new society, the girls lose their Spanish accents and acquire some psychological disorders.

Secondhand World, published in 2006, is Katherine Min's first novel. Setting her evocative and sensual story in the turbulent 1970s, the author writes an unusual coming-of-age story featuring adolescent rebelliousness and the inevitable problems of cultural disorientation as a young Korean American searches for her identity in upstate New York. Eighteen-year-old Isa seems trapped between two worlds – one characterized by the anguish of her immigrant parents, encapsulated in their émigré isolation, and the other by her strange new feelings, both emotional and sexual. In her eagerness to fit in, to attain “an American recognition,” and her obsessive disgust with her Oriental look, she chooses to break away which inevitably comes at a price.

This article will discuss the themes of displacement and the fragmented self in the obsessive search for identity during the process of assimilation in the above two

novels. Dealing with the split self of the immigrant, the essay will probe into the resulting dis-ease and madness when one confronts multiple cultures and languages in a confused manner. Theories on postcolonial identity, such as Homi Bhaba's concept of "homely" and Gayatri Spivak's the subaltern, as well as Caruth's theory on trauma and Peterson's interpretation of amnesia will be applied to support the analysis of these two novels.

Keywords: identity, fragmented self, displacement, assimilation, dis-ease, dis-order

I.

The immigration process inevitably entails a kind of amnesia. In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Fredric Jameson declares: “History is what hurts” (102). To save history from thorough deconstruction under the poststructuralist theory that deems history as only a text, a narrative construction of the past that has little or no relation to what really happened, Jameson insists that “even though History is an absent cause, the effects of history can be registered and reckoned with” (Peterson 1) because the painful effects of past events continue to pressure the present moment. For immigrants who came to America, “history is what hurts” has two connotations. First, the old histories they left behind, the memories of the old world, are painful but are impossible to be totally erased as they start their new life in the new world. Second, the new history they have to face, mainstream American history, focuses so much on the present and is so optimistic that it works against the sustained engagement with memory and commitment to complexity that is crucial for minority histories so that these histories can never come into full cultural consciousness. To deal with the painful process of transition to assimilate into the new culture, to escape from this hurtful feeling from their sense of history, many first-generation immigrants choose to set aside their past, which is part of their identities, by keeping silent; thus they suffer from a kind of disease, or dis-ease, resulting from this conscious choice of amnesia.

However, this amnesia consciously incurred by the first-generation immigrants necessarily leaves some gaps in the fabrication of history for their children who have to find ways to fill those gaps before they can feel somewhat complete without a void or a hole in the formation of the self. The forced amnesia that these children have to confront is in some way more traumatic than the amnesia their parents suffer when they have to try so hard to the point of obsession to prove that they are Americans since they are often viewed as “foreigners” because of their color and the culture they are associated with. It is especially painful during their growing-up process, when they are confused by the disjunction between the past of their parents and their present environment. For some minority writers who have been through this growing-up process, writing has become a strategy to fill those gaps left by their parents, and writing in English has become a strategy to assimilate, to feel at home in the world in which they now live; it has become a healing process for the pain they suffer from their obsession of an indisputable identity and forced amnesia. Thus many writers of color, particularly women writers, who either came to the United States as children with their parents or were born and raised there by first-generation immigrants, for many reasons and often reaching far beyond Jameson’s impetus to save history from

deconstruction, demonstrate a profound engagement with history, present and forgotten, through their writings.

This article tries to call attention to this double burden—to write both literature and history, and to deal with the split-self through writing in “the stepmother language”¹—for women writers of color and to show how these writers grapple with this burden and how they negotiate the very different claims of the past and the present through their writings. To fulfill these goals, Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* and Katherine Min’s *Secondhand World* are chosen for analysis as both novels deal with the traumatic growing-up processes of diasporic subjects due to displacement as well as possible solutions (or irresolution) to their struggles.

II.

Julia Alvarez was born on March 27, 1950, in the U.S. where she lived for the first three months of her life before her parents returned to the Dominican Republic, where her “childhood history” is set (*Something* 116). Her family was forced to flee the politically troubled country in August of 1960 because of her father’s role in a failed plot to overthrow the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. This flight and Trujillo’s role in it reappear throughout Alvarez’s writings, allowing her to explore the personal, familial, and political consequences of exile, particularly for women. Confronted with a new world in New York City, Alvarez immediately began her project of mapping her new country, and thus a new identity, by “put[ting] it down on paper” (*Something* 173) in English, her newly claimed “portable homeland.” (Johnson ix) In an interview, Alvarez described the definition of “identity”: “I think identity is an arrangement or series of clusters, a kind of stacking or layering of selves, horizontal and vertical layers, the geography of selves made up of the different communities you inhabit” (*Something* 238). The focus on community has particular relevance for the shaping of identity in exile. Alvarez thus advocates the multiplicity of experience, place, and belonging as “she draws together not only myriad races but also classes, languages, genders, nations, and cultures in the literature of the Americas” (Johnson x). Alvarez maps that multiplicity through narratives of homeland, family, and identity.

¹ Novakovich defines “stepmother tongue writers” as writers who write in English as a second language. These writers include not just immigrants who come to America from another country but also Native Americans who, though grew up speaking English, consider English a language imposed from the invading culture and those who grew up surrounded by another language and culture. (10-12) However, as the word “stepmother” proverbially can be cruel, some authors, such as Julia Alvarez, are against the use of term to define what she calls: a “second” mother tongue (219-220), though “perhaps it is true English treats many new comers harshly and unlovingly.” (10)

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, published in 1991, is Alvarez's first novel. It received the PEN/Oakland Josephine Miles Award and was named by both the American Library Association and the *New York Times Book Review* as a Notable book of 1991. While not properly a memoir, much of the novel is based on the author's life. Yolanda, the artist and third oldest of the García girls, is the character who most closely mirrors Alvarez, with many similar experiences growing up in the Dominican Republic and in Queens, New York with three sisters. The fifteen stories in the novel, through which the same characters move in and out, appear in reverse chronological order and are structured to reflect the loss that lies at its center. The form of a merging of elements of the short story with those of the novel, also known as the composite novel or a short-story cycle, works as a set of short stories that are interrelated to function as a complete novel, but can also stand on their own. Ellen McCracken asserts that Alvarez's choice for this intergenre, with its focus on "disparate, individual moments," is based on "dissatisfaction with the ideological assumptions inherent in the novels" (43) and in general the novel's tacit modernist assumptions of a coherent identity and a true self. Thus, these stories are told from various narrative perspectives with voices of different characters, and sometimes they even change within one story. Through the deployment of "narrativized trouble"² (Graza 28), Alvarez shows identity to be an unstable category undergirded by gender, ethnic, and class trouble. Moreover, by beginning at the chronological ending of the story, Alvarez offers her reader the opportunity to read the narrative's beginning against the grain of subsequent episodes. For example, by the time the García girls tell us that after a couple of years in America they had "*more* than adjusted" (*How* 109) to teenage life, we already know that Yolanda has not, perhaps cannot, adjust to life in the New World (Nas 130) as this is revealed in the opening story, "Antojos."

In "Antojos"--the word meaning a kind of irrational craving or urge--the mature protagonist Yolanda returns to the island, secretly hoping to make it her home as "she is not so sure she'll be going back" (*How* 7). However, as Yolanda can only express herself "in halting Spanish," whether she can cross the boundary between the Spanish and English-speaking worlds to re-enter her native culture is doubtful. Even in the beginning of the story, Yolanda is presented in the style of an American hippie: "shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband" (3) and seen by her Dominican cousins as "one of those Peace Corps girls who have let themselves go as to do dubious good in the world" (4). As the story unfolds, it progressively discloses the gap between Yolanda and

² Graza believes that in the novel ethnic identity is noticeably linked to "trouble" on several levels, undermining the happily pluralist view implicit in much contemporary multiculturalism. By engaging in both narrational and thematic "trouble," Alvarez disrupts the celebratory aspects of multiculturalism. (31)

Dominican society. Yolanda pursues a solitary course of action, displaying a further gap between herself and other women as she faces her aunts and female cousins who do not believe she, a woman, should travel alone in the Dominican Republic. (9) Yolanda believes “she has never felt at home in the States, never” (12); that is, in Homi Bhabha’s term, America is, “unhomely” to her, so she takes the trip to her homeland, searching for a home. “Let this turn out to be my home,” she wishes as the candles on her birthday cake in the shape of the island are blown out. As a result of her feeling of displacement in the new country, she romanticizes her trip to her homeland, concretized in her trip to the countryside, a countryside that is not a significant part of her personal or family history. Her craving for guavas, according to Helen Atawube Yitah, is “the manifestation of a deeper and more private yearning,” and her trip into the countryside in search of the fruits is, “a journey toward her inner self” (Yitah 236). Thus her search of her past identity implies perhaps a need to recover a distant self or cultural location through memory and nostalgia, that is, “in the ‘marginal’, ‘haunting’, ‘unhomely’ spaces between dominant social formations” (Bhabha 450). Unfortunately, however, she fails in her attempt to fit into the society of the Dominican Republic because, though she is not unaware of some realities, she under-estimates their significance: the Dominican Republic is divided by class, race, and sex to the extent that she feels she no longer belongs.

In “World and the Home,” Bhabha describes the “unhomely” as being related to “the uncanny literary and social effect of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocation.” (141) Yolanda’s feeling of estrangement manifests itself as a “hollow” within her story (*How* 269) that must be filled. In the closing story, “The Drum,” Yolanda is ripped from her Dominican home in an untimely fashion and transplanted to the bewildering and “unhomely hollow” of the New World. In the same way, the kitten’s impatience to reunite with its mother parallels Yolanda’s urge to find her *antojo*. When Yolanda plucks the kitten from its mother and “plunk[s] her down in the hollow of [her] drum,” (*How* 287) the word “hollow” echoes the words “quiet” and “silence” that appear more than once in the first story to indicate a sense of loss and a kind of amnesia, a trauma that a diasporic subject must suffer in the process of adjustment and adaptation.

In fact, Yolanda’s task of piecing together her fragmented identity is one that proves impossible to accomplish in America, where her name cannot be found in a display of supposedly personalized key chains. The assumption is that every person should be able to find an item that bears his or her name. When, however, Yolanda’s mother seeks to buy her a personalized set of pencils, the closest name she can find is “Jolinda.” Considering the importance that Yolanda attaches to her name, this can be interpreted as her being marked as the “Other” in American society. (Yitah 238)

At the other extreme, this “no name woman” of fragmented identity is given many names in the chapter titled “Joe”. She is Yolanda, nicknamed Yo in Spanish, misunderstood as Joe in English, doubled and pronounced like the toy, Yoyo, and “Joey” when forced to select from a rack of personalized key chains. Adding to these are also “Josephine” (*How* 76) and “Jolinda” (*How* 90). Yitah contends that the arrangement of names at the begging of the chapter “suggests the subject of naming that it deals with: There is “Joe,” the English version of her name, in bold face and, beneath it, *Yolanda* in italics.” (239) These names certainly serve as signifiers of her American and Dominican identity, and their arrangement seems to indicate that “when others look at her what they see is an Americanized “Joe,” whereas she is yearning to be Yolanda” (239) who will always elude Americans, no matter how well they appear to know her.

These “Americans” who cannot see her true self are mostly manifested in her relationships with American men. In “The Rudy Elmenhurst Story,” Yolanda examines her infatuation with Rudy in a first-person narrative, but the story forms part of a larger analysis of a curious cultural disconnect. As Yolanda recalls, her college days were a time of sexual liberation for her fellow students, but she still stuck fast to more traditional norms despite her almost complete assimilation into American culture. Ibis Gómez-Vegas noted that the use and misuse of language explain Yolanda’s and Rudy’s inability to consummate their relationship (90), but there is additional cultural hindrance that forms the barricade. First of all, when Rudy wants to borrow a pen from Yolanda, she finds “a teensy pencil from a monogrammed set my mother had given me for Christmas: a box of pencils ‘my color,’ red, and inscribed with my so-called name in gold letters: *Jolinda*” (90). In fact, in her urge to assimilate to American culture up to this point in her immigration life, she must have used the pencil as much as she can because “it was so worn down, only the hook of the *J* was left” (90). So Rudy sees her as *Jolinda* when they first meet each other. Later, after they have been seeing each other for a month, Yolanda compares the image of Rudy’s parents in a picture with the image of her parents:

His parents looked so young and casual—like classmates. My own old world parents were still an embarrassment at parents weekend, my father with his thick mustache and three-piece suit and fedora hat, my mother in one of her outfits she bought especially to visit us at school, everything overly matched...I marveled at his youthful parents. No wonder Rudy didn’t have hangups, no wonder his high school acne hadn’t left him riddled with self-doubt, his name hadn’t cowed him. (98)

It shows her self-consciousness of being seen as “foreign” and her obsession with an American identity as revealed in an “American” name. Moreover, she does not feel herself as *Jolinda* or a representative of “the Spanish girl” that Rudy believes she is: “hot-blooded” and “all the Catholic bullshit” (99), “like a geography lesson” (98). She wants to be seen as Yolanda, the girl who eventually gains a superior control of English.

Gómez-Vegas explains that the linguistic confusion that appears in Yolanda’s life, whether in her college days when she still has an incomplete command of English, or later when she has a good command of the language but fails to communicate in that language, forms a pattern in the young woman’s amorous relationships: “Yolanda’s sexuality is influenced by her ability or inability to use the English language, and her relationships with men are likewise influenced. When she is involved with a North American male, she simply does not speak the same language he speaks”(92). Simply speaking, the roots of Yolanda’s problem with American men, from Rudy to her husband John, relate to the cultural differences between Dominican and American attitudes toward sex and relationship.

In the chapter titled “Joe”, Yolanda is sent to a mental institution after her total disillusionment about her relationship with her husband, John, who fails to understand her cultural identity, mainly her Dominican culture and heritage, represented by Spanish, and claims that she is crazy. Her madness is further confirmed by her doctor when she speaks only in quotations or misquotations of literature she has read or songs she has heard sung to her parents. Yolanda's descent into madness and her inability to communicate with other people, especially the ones she loves the most, reflects the dissolution of her sense of self. Moreover, the fragmented narration of this chapter reflects both Yolanda's disjointed thought processes related to her mental breakdown, as well as her fragmented sense of identity as her national and cultural identity is split between the Dominican Republic and the United States. This fragmented sense of self, or the dissolution of Yolanda's sense of identity, is brought on by the heartbreak of divorce, and is further indicated by her name from Yolanda to Yo to Yoyo to Joe to Josephine throughout her relationships with John and her family members. As seen in the “Dear John” note Yolanda writes to her husband, she does not know how to explain the “peculiar mix” of her cultures: “*I’m needing some space, some time, until my head-slash-heart-slash-soul*—No, no, no, she didn’t want to divide herself any more, three persons in one Yo” (*How* 78). This scene poignantly captures Yolanda’s struggle with a subjectivity fractured by cultural, racial and gender influences that she must learn to recognize or somehow to control. Her later insistence on being called only Yolanda reflects her desire to heal by integrating her

various emotional and psychological parts. Thus, Yolanda's multiple selves are validated as she garners her own literary voice in English: "She finally sounded like herself in English!" (143) Yolanda appreciates the poetic in an older role model and understands better her fragmented self when her teacher Sister Zoe says upon seeing snow fall, "Each flake was different, like a person, irreplaceable and beautiful" (167). Thus the narrator-protagonists are learning to find beauty beyond the limitations of superficial, commercially imposed standards.

As a member of the 1.5 generation³, Yolanda may suffer the most from the burden of silence, but this problem clearly affects the entire family. It seems that as we follow the narrative back in time, the Garcías' inability to express themselves in a coherent fashion occurs during every family crisis, beginning with the first years of their new lives in the United States. In ninth grade, Yolanda is chosen to deliver the Teacher's Day address at her school, but her father angrily silences her budding literary voice by tearing her speech that shows she has finally found her voice in English after having discovered Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" as he considers it being disrespectful of her teachers and standing for her disobedience to his patriarchal rule (145-6). A few years earlier, Carla, the oldest of the four sisters, starts her American elementary school education by walking every day to the nearby Catholic school, where a gang of boys teases her and even throws rocks at her because of her foreign accent. Much worse, one day a flasher follows her home in his car and exposes himself to her, and the young girl's shock is such that she remains speechless throughout her entire ordeal. When the man starts moaning while "cup[ping] his hand over his thing as if it were a flame that might blow out", Carla "clutched her bookbag tiger in her hand. Her mouth hung open. Not one word, English or Spanish, occurred to her" (157).

This emphasis on language is especially acute throughout the novel. Just as narrator-protagonists confront the boundaries of male/female behaviors and of external standards versus their internal perceptions, they also encounter boundaries between their Spanish and English-speaking worlds. Their unfolding ability to move with ease between the two realms is an indication of their comfort with their own beings and a reflection of their increased interaction with the outside world. The language confrontations are not only linguistically motivated, but are also affected by gaps in generations, in physical development, in religious beliefs, in country versus urban living, and in class standards. In short, the ever-evolving cultural norms of the narrator-protagonists influence their language use. Carla's reaction is merely the first

³ The term 1.5 generation or *1.5G* refers to people who immigrate to a new country before or during their early teens. They earn the label the "*1.5 generation*" because they bring with them characteristics from their home country but continue their assimilation and socialization in the new country. Their identity is thus a combination of new and old culture and tradition.

example of the Garcia girls' silence of exile. Whether in English or Spanish, in the United States or in the Dominican Republic, the four sisters find themselves caught between two languages and two cultures, as one would expect from members of an intermediate generation that has trouble finding its distinct cultural space. These young women, however, never stop observing, reading, speaking, and writing from the border, for their languages are derived from the intersection of their two cultures. Fortunately, the linguistic blend gives rise not to silence, but instead to a rush of words whose flow will not be stemmed. This is a trait seen in another character, Sandra, the second daughter of the Garcia family.

When the reader first learns about Sandra, or Sandi, she has been a patient in a psychiatric hospital following a nervous breakdown. Like Cervantes's Don Quixote, whom she misquotes, Sandi has suffered a mental collapse from reading excessively while attending graduate school. As a result of her breakdown, Sandi has lost touch with her humanity, firmly believing that she is turning into a monkey. She eventually comes home, but remains on anti-depressants. Sirias believes that Sandi grows into a hypersensitive woman who is hard on herself and does not take criticism well. She asserts that "Sandi suffers from an inferiority crisis stemming from her being the second of four sisters who are close in age" (28). But a more apt explanation is that, like her sisters, she is confused by her multiple identities as a result of displacement.

It is important to keep in mind that, although Alvarez is often referred to as a multi-ethnic writer, her work makes it particularly clear that it cannot be assumed that the multi-ethnic writer is a spokesperson for the central experience of the writer's group. Her novel clearly shows that as a so-called multi-ethnic writer one can hold one's own cultural identity and yet explore the differences within the self as well as within the group, community or state one forms part of. Alvarez does not speak for or represent her ethnic group, nor can she be considered to be representative of this ethnic group. (Nas 128-9) Gayatri Spivak outlined the problematics of the double meaning of the term "representation" in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988:276), referring to these mechanics as "proxy" and "portrait". She insisted that these two meanings should be considered separately when discussing the dynamics of "speaking for" a particular group. By charting the different family members' reactions in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* to how an Americanized, upper-class Dominican family, forced into political exile in the United States, comes to terms with life in America, Julia Alvarez avoids becoming a spokesperson for a generalized US Latino/a experience and thus escapes the double bind of group identity, or "representation". What makes the novel so different from other works of immigrant literature is that instead of speaking for her ethnic group, Alvarez writes

both “inside” and “outside” her group identity, by taking the problematics of cross-cultural and cross-class understanding as her subject matter.

III.

Katherine Min, in the same manner, also defies the denomination of representation of a minority group, Korean American, or the even broader and vaguer, Asian American, in this case, with her novel, *Secondhand World*. In the novel, Isadora Myung Hee Sohn, a second-generation Korean American teenaged girl, repudiates her parents’ values and the traditional Korean culture they hold on to and embarks on a painful journey of searching for her identity, only to find broken dreams in the end with the disintegration, to say the least, of her whole family. Though the father in the novel is more or less a stereotype of Korean fathers, and the mother is somewhat lacking in individuality in certain respects, Isadora’s journey, which involves her best friend, Rachel, a white girl, and her boyfriend, Hero, an albino boy, is by no means representative of those of Asian American girls.

In *An Ethics of Betrayal*, Crystal Parikh pairs up Asian Americans and Latina/os as “alien others”. She contends that “[d]espite being the two fastest growing populations within the United States, Asian Americans and Latino/as have been racially marked by the cultural image of themselves as ‘forever foreign’” (16). She asserts that in the United States “the black/white poles of racialization remain firmly entrenched” (75), and in her discussion of the case of Richard Rodriguez,⁴ she quotes the Chicano author’s remarks when he acknowledges the extent to which the Asian-American presence has helped to give him a sense of himself in the black/white terrain of U.S. racial discourse: “When black and white America argued, I felt I was overhearing some family quarrel that didn’t include me. Korean and Chinese and Japanese faces in Sacramento rescued me from the simplicities of black and white America” (qtd. in Parikh 76). It is from this perspective that the parallel of the two novels chosen for discussion in this article is significant as both authors can be viewed as speaking as “alien others” and yet both of them abdicate, or desire to abdicate, the burden of racial representation and the restrictive categories of “minority author” or “ethnic literature” by rhetorically, and contradictorily, thematizing it and grounding it in autobiographical narratives of minoritarian subjectivity. Moreover, even as “alien others” rejected from “the black/white pole of racialization,” they speak from the margin of the marginality, as both “Latino/as” and “Asians” encompass such a wide range of ethnicities and Dominicans do not stand out among “Latino/as”, just as

⁴ Richard Rodriguez is an American writer born into a Mexican immigrant family in San Francisco. His 2002 collection of essays, entitled *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Award.

Koreans are often mistaken as Chinese or Japanese. Even more perilous is the position of both authors when gender is put into consideration.

Katherine Min was born in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, but her parents are first-generation immigrants from Korea. One of her short stories, “Courting a Monk”, a short story that won her the Pushcart Prize and has been many times anthologized, is about a second-generation Korean American who grew up in suburban New York State with Korean parents and experienced “racism, cross-cultural conflicts, (and) self-hatred.” (“A Conversation with Katherine Min”) In this story, rich with autobiographical elements, Gina, the main character, who is also a second-generation Korean American, strives to establish her American identity by resisting the Korean cultural values imposed upon her and represented by her father, a veteran of the Korean War and a professor of physics. When she goes to college, she chooses to major in English, a language that her father cannot, or refuses to acknowledge, and, instead of obeying her father’s order of not letting “the American boys take advantages” (302), she “takes advantage of” American boys (meaning Caucasian men) by having random sex with them. Soon she is attracted by Micah, a white boy who has been determined to become a Buddhist monk ever since coming back from Nepal where he studied Buddhism in a monastery in the Himalayas. Though Micah resists Gina’s attempts at seduction by introducing her to the Buddhist concept of the renunciation of desire, she succeeds in consummating their relationship after taking him home to meet her father, and they eventually marry. The seemingly happy ending, however, isn’t happy after all as in the end of the story Micah feels lost as he fails in his spiritual quest for Buddhist enlightenment and Gina cannot help but wonder: “What is the sound of a life not lived?” (312)

Secondhand World, published in 2006, is Min’s first novel, which also deals with displacement and assimilation of a second-generation Korean American girl. In fact, it is almost an expanded version of the story, “Courting A Monk,” as the protagonist who experiences “racism, cross-cultural conflicts, (and) self-hatred” goes through a similar process of searching for an identity by repudiating the Korean cultural values, also imposed upon her and represented by her father, who is, again, a veteran of the Korean War and a professor of physics. The major difference is Isadora Myung Hee Sohn, or Isa, the protagonist, is a teenager in high school, a younger Gina. Thus the novel deals more with the growing-up process of a teenaged girl—angst-ridden, disaffected and subject to racial prejudice at school—rather than merely the desire to fill up the void or gaps left by her father that form her fragmented identity of a college girl as Gina.

The novel opens with a straightforward and brief self introduction of the 18-year-old Isadora Myung Hee Sohn who claims she is “being treated for second-

and third-degree burns” in a medical center in Albany, New York, as a result of a fire that killed her parents “on June 11, 1976, at approximately 3:20 a.m.” (*Secondhand* 3) While recovering from her injury, Isa looks back on her life and the lives of her parents to understand why one of them would choose to set the fatal fire the night before Isa was to graduate from high school. The novel is constructed with a series of short chapters loosely connected by the plot and each with a title that indicates the content of the chapter. At first glance, the chapters are like vignettes that can be read separately, and thus the novel seems to take up the form of a short-story cycle. But readers soon find out that, though some chapters can indeed be read independently as short stories, these chapters are knitted tightly to present a Korean-American family and their life in upper New York State.

Min presents the Korean roots of Isa in the second chapter when the teenaged girl narrates about another fire that leaves “a shiny purple scar, ropy and asymmetrical” on her mother’s head. In the same chapter, Min starts to inform readers of the Korean values that Isa resents as she says that her grandmother is “overwhelmed by daughters, disgraced by them” (7). Readers are soon overwhelmed by all sorts of details about the family and the parents’ values as Isa introduces her parents, their marriage, and their ways of life, up to the point when Stephen, Isa’s younger brother, is killed accidentally by the truck of deliverymen when they are delivering a washer to their home to fulfill part of the mother’s American (consumer) dream. Isa’s father, a scientist and professor in Albany, has always seemed cold and remote. In the chapter “Incomprehension” for example, Isa tells us that whenever her father would speak to her in Korean, “it was harsh, a vocabulary of scolding, of rebuke...Do you want a spanking?...Stupid!” (14) Though she is a mere child, he does not tolerate her inability to take up the two languages he knows well: Korean and science, and gives up teaching her soon after he tries in vain. In Isa’s mind, she believes that “he gave up on me altogether. I was too difficult, too rebellious, too unlike any Korean daughter he could possibly have imagined for himself. ‘Myung Hee-ya,’ he would say, ‘you should have been born a boy’” (16). Even when she becomes the only child in the family after her brother’s death, the traditional patriarchal values of the parents do not make Isa feel treasured or help her overcome the isolation she feels trapped in in school. In the chapter “Passage” Isa stares at her parents’ wedding picture and feels “the weight of my mother’s hope like a medicine ball to the chest” (45). She wonders, “[w]hy had she smiled? It was so clearly a son they should have secured for their firstborn. Stephen MHS. Son and heir. They didn’t have to tell me. Somehow I just knew, knew in the way that children know. Who is loved and who is merely borne” (45).

Caruth theorizes trauma as the (re)experiencing of a wound that has not been forgotten but has been missed at the original moment of infliction; trauma occurs when the wound cries out belatedly, after the fact of the original wounding. Thus, for Caruth, trauma involves a double wounding and, in its inherent latency, trauma is simultaneously a displacement of that experience and an undeniable connection to it. The link between trauma and the initial missed experience leads to a model of reference that is not direct and immediate, but belated, displaced, and oblique. For Caruth, such a theory of trauma and its indirect referentiality suggest “the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential” (13). In *Secondhand World*, every one in Isa’s family is traumatized and their trauma gradually defines who they are.

At the death of her son, indirectly caused by her, Isa’s mother suffers from a series of nervous breakdowns and an ectopic pregnancy. When she finally recovers from her son’s death, at least on the surface, she is obsessed with the idea of rendering beauty to her daughter by changing her Oriental look to a Western look, even to the point of trying to persuade Isa to undergo plastic surgery. When Isa asks her mother, “What’s wrong with the way I look now?” her mother “flushed and smiled. ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘You are pretty girl, Isa. I just...It is always good to improve oneself’” (158). But Isa knows that “[s]he was lying. I realized that she was always lying. To me, to my father, to herself most of all” (158). When Isa’s mother starts taking literature classes at a community college, she discovers a new identity of herself through “Song of Myself,” an interesting echo of Yolanda in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, but tragically this new identity is what causes the death of her husband and herself in the final fire scene as she falls in love with another man, Bill, her professor of literature in the community college, probably in an attempt to forget all her past and to finally assimilate into the mainstream culture.

Parikh asserts that as the minority subject confronts (and is confronted with) the conditions of its own existence, it engages in acts of betrayal. This subject continually and necessarily returns to founding moments, reckoning with the literal and symbolic violence at the heart of its own being, and it risks the self in order to call forth the others who haunt that being (Parikh 3). The final betrayal of Isa’s mother, interpreted in this light, is an act of the accumulated effects of everything that has happened in her whole life, as a daughter in Korea who was scarred, as an obedient wife of a Korean man, as a failed mother who lost her son for a trivial cause, and as an unfulfilled immigrant woman in America. However, as Isa assumes that the one who sets the fire and kills his wife and himself is Isa’s father, he can be seen as the one who engages in a violent act of betrayal. He, a veteran of the Korean War, is haunted by the history he left behind when moving to America. He tries hard to

register Korean identity into her daughter's consciousness, but this concept of Korean values is, according to Isa, a collective history; as she says, "[h]e had tried to teach me, not about his personal past but about our collective history" (217). The personal history he has left behind is never revealed until he is killed in the fire that he or his wife set to the house.

In the chapter, "Discovery," Isa opens the box that contains her father's "effects" and discovers a blue booklet filled with her father's intimate notes to his dead sister, Noona, whom, he told Isa, was killed in the war along with his mother. These notes, probably jotted down not long before he is killed in the suicide-murder, reveal his war-time history and his feelings as an immigrant who tries but cannot thrust away his past. In one paragraph, after he tells Noona about his status and his family in America, he says, "And even after all this, I feel time reversed, like my life here is the memory, and what is real to me is the smell of boiling *chig'ge* in the dirt kitchen of Chongwoondong..." (251-51). He recounts how his sister was kidnapped by the soldiers and how he killed a young man of about sixteen, commenting, "it is a terrible, sickening thing, Noona, what war does to a man. What it does to a boy who is only just becoming a man" (259-60). In the final entry, he says:

The truth is, more and more these days, I feel as though I died in 1953—along with so many classmates and friends—and that everything that's happened since is a dream. America is a country without death. Everything is shiny and new to make you forget such a thing exists. Here people my age dress and act like teenagers. My wife does this. No one wants to be old. Why would they? There is no past here. There is no history. And here I am, a man trapped in the past, entangled in history, wandering like a ghost (260-61).

This clearly testifies to what Fredric Jameson declares: "History is what hurts" (102) as well as Adrienne Rich's remarks that "[i]n America we have only the present tense" (23). Rich's observation refers to a cultural crisis concerning American history and American memory, a crisis that might be called American amnesia (Peterson 4), further defined by Toni Morrison when she says, "We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean," to her interviewer Paul Gilroy. "The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past. That memory is much more in danger now than it was thirty years ago" (Morrison, "Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison," 179). In short, to deal with the painful process of

transition to assimilate into the new culture, to escape from this hurtful feeling from the sense of history, Isa's father chooses to set aside his past, which is part of his identity, by keeping silent and thus suffers a kind of disease, or dis-ease, resulting from this conscious choice of amnesia. And this eventually kills his hope, and ends his life.

The final victim, and maybe the most significant one, is the first-person narrator of the novel, Isa, a teenager who suffers both inside and outside in her shaping process. Her father might have died in 1953, but he lives on with the wife of his choice and his daughter, who often feels deserted because of his silence. Typical of a teenager's rebellion against the parents, Isa rebels against her father's authoritarian rules. Meanwhile, she is negatively affected as her mother consistently depreciates her appearance and as she perceives that being a girl is inferior to being a boy in Korean culture. In her disillusionment about Korean culture, she wants to be fully American only to be teased by schoolmates as "Chink". Her fragmented identity appears early in the novel in the chapter, "Two Names" in which she is named Isadora by her mother, and Myung Hee by her father, and in fact, she is called Isa by her friends. This multiple or fragmented identity of Isa is similar to that of Yolanda in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, whose many names reflect her identity confusion. Like Yolanda in her college days who chooses to piece together her fragmented identity by trying to assimilate into American culture through taking up the Americanized name, Jolinda, Isa chooses to desert her Korean name from the very beginning. As her effort to pull herself away from her parents who represent suffocating Korean values, Isa spends more and more time at her friend Rachel's house, drawn as much by Rachel's messy but relaxed parents as by Rachel.

When Isa is called "Chink" or "Chinee" in school, she responds to them by claiming herself Korean, but the reaction is a blank one: "[a] look of confusion clouds their faces. 'What's that?' says Roger Huckins" (26). At home, her father reacts strongly by "pointing with his chopsticks at me from across the kitchen table" and tells her, "You tell them Korean civilization is five thousand years old. America not even born yet, still belong to Indians and wild animals" (26). Then he adds, "What do they know about us? Nothing. They think Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean all the same. Stupid!" (27) In "Delivery," Mrs. Cranston, the teacher, represents another authority that stunts Isa's growth with her racial bias. She criticizes Isa for her "sloppy handwriting" when the real reason is "her daughter-in-law was Korean": "My son's over there now,' she'd said, looking at me as though I were responsible. 'IN the army. That's how they met'" (35). Her bias against Isa is further demonstrated when once "we were dissecting fetal pigs, she'd come over to me and said, 'You people eat things like this over there, don't you?'" (35) After the death of

her brother, Isa feels more estranged from both school and home. She talks about “a pervading sense of separation” and that she never brings friends home because I couldn’t see them there, in that space that housed my parents’ grief, couldn’t imagine what we would do surrounded by the strange smells of kimchi and fish chig’ge, among the celadon vases and hanging scrolls of Chinese poetry in feathered black brush-strokes” (44). As a result, she wants to get away: “I wanted to dissociate myself as much as possible from my parents from what I had come to see as their sad immigrant isolation, their outside-looking-in. I would not be the straight-A student, the geisha, or the coolie” (51). In her urge to assimilate into white culture, represented by Rachel and her family, Isa even “sells” her parents to Rachel and her stepsisters, telling them of her parents’ disadvantages of being immigrants and their secrets:

“I told Rachel and her stepsisters stories about my parents, making them funny, skewing their peculiarities into easy caricature, trading on their foreignness, their accents and their immigrant smells...I would mimic my father cruelly, exaggerating the l’s instead of r’s, leaving out articles, making him sound like some dim-witted MASH extra. I betrayed the secret of my mother’s wig. (69)

Her obsession to establish an “American” identity is fully revealed when Isa becomes romantically involved with another outsider at school, an Albino boy named Hero. Parikh points out that “for many minority subjects, the struggle to ‘be white’ (i.e., to assimilate) in a post-segregationist, post-civil rights movement, in fact indexes a desire to become ‘unraced’ altogether, holding on to only those ethnic traits considered superfluous, ‘merely’ multicultural, and thus non-threatening to the hegemonic nation” (78). On one hand, her romance with Hero is part of the growing-up process of a teenaged girl who is experiencing sexual awareness, but on the other, Hero symbolizes an ideal identity as he is “unraced”, having no color at all, and thus transcends the racial boundary and erases (e-races) the disjunction caused by displacement. This symbol, however, has to dissolve as there is no such thing as “an ideal identity.”

The final twist of the story is that after the fire, Isa assumes her father's responsibility until she reads his journal, which makes it clear that he was incapable of such violence. Isa recognizes that her mother is the one who set the fire, but she also realizes that assigning guilt matters less than appreciating her own survival, though a heavy price is paid for her final enlightenment and her gratefulness for life. Parikh contends that “the possibility of the subject rests “in passivity,” in its subjection to the

Other. The openness to that demand, the responsiveness to and responsibility for the Other, are the irrevocable conditions of the self assuming itself...The Other exists not as an alter ego but is in and of itself the condition of alterity, and being accedes to an inter-subjectivity that is profoundly asymmetrical” (5). Furthermore, “the subject cannot return itself to the generalized existence of the Other, but it must also respond for ‘one’s right to be,’ because Being forecloses the Other’s existence” (5). For minority authors who try to present a new kind of diaspora writing that centers on the notion of hyphenated identity or the idea that exiles truly inhabit a space between two cultures, this existential notion of the being of the Other is the antidote to the blind search for identity of those who are trapped in the myth of displacement.

IV.

Indeed, the most enormous cost involved in immigrant journeys to a different country is the transformation that the immigrant identity must undergo in the process, a formation of a new culture, in Bhabha’s term, which is performative and always in the making. For Bhabha, the moment of performance is an “unhomely” one, haunted and uneasy. This is because it is moving out into the previously never articulated or experienced, and attempting an articulation. However, “unhomeliness” is not the feeling of being bereft outside your culture with nothing else to hold on to; it is the feeling of being outside your culture with the possibility of forging something between cultures while being in dialogue with the past. (*The Location of Culture* 24-28) In other words, in order to reach the promised land, immigrants “must travel the unfamiliar road of reconciling multiple selves that arise out of the different cultural heritages of the native culture and the new one” (Yitah 235). In some cases, the native culture is largely sacrificed, through a kind of amnesia, as they become acculturated to the host society. But in their unconsciousness it remains an integral part of their new identity. In other cases, such as Yolanda and, probably, Isa, they seek a third option: a self that is worth more to her/him than just the two cultures from which it is fashioned as it constitutes the essence of her/him being, though both Yolanda and Isa have to suffer much confusion during the process of forming such a self.

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Yauling Hsieh

Associate Professor, English Department, Soochow University

E-mail Address: yauling@scu.edu.tw