Taking Up Space

by Brooke Nguyen

Sometime in second grade, I started eating Lunchables at school. I secretly despised the cold array of bland carbs and mushy toppings that were supposed to pass as a 'meal,' but I insisted on buying them instead of bringing the leftover bò lúc lắc and phở áp chảo my grandmother packed for me. I did my best to hide every trace of my parents' culture, fearing that the stench of hoisin and fish sauce might give away that—despite having grown up in California—I didn't fit in with my American classmates.

'The Lunchable story' is one that many Asian Americans recognize instantly. It even served as a subplot in the 2015 pilot of ABC's sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat:* the show's main character, Eddie, a young Taiwanese American boy, switches to Lunchables after being mocked by his fellow students for bringing noodles to school. NPR reporter Kat Chow described the scene as "straight out of the Immigrant Kid Handbook—the other kids finding your lunches radioactive, your name unpronounceable, your parents' rules bizarre, your house otherworldly." Having elements of our culture ostracized sends a jarring message to Asians in the United States: you are outsiders. Many of the traits that differentiate Asian Americans—from the way we look to the smell of our food—are integral parts of our identities. If Asian identities don't fit inside the box that defines a 'real' American, then how can we call this country home?

In her essay "Bad English," writer and poet Cathy Park Hong explores this feeling of alienation. She describes her mother's accented English as "a crush of piano keys that used to make me cringe whenever she spoke to a white person. As my mother spoke, I watched the white person, often a woman, put on a fright mask of strained tolerance: wide eyes frozen in trapped patience, smile widened in condescension." Hong learned

early on to step in and speak on her mother's behalf in these situations; she hoped "to shame [the white woman] with my sobering fluency for thinking what she was thinking." Hong "wield[ed]" English as a "weapon in a power struggle" to prove that her family belonged in the States just as much as anyone else—a battle many minorities face in academia, at the workplace, and in everyday conversation. Unlike Hong, however, many immigrants for whom English is a second language do not have the luxury of using seamless English as proof of belonging. Robert Rey Agudo, the program director at Dartmouth College's Department of Spanish and Portuguese, asserts that

people tend to make negative stereotypical assumptions about speakers with a nonnative accent . . . Studies show that when nonnative speakers respond to advertisements for housing, their conversations with prospective landlords are more likely to be unsuccessful, on average, than those of callers "without accents."

Even Hong, a Korean American who has been on the receiving end of similar snap judgements, admits, "I sometimes act like that white woman. When I phone in my order to a Chinese restaurant and the cashier doesn't understand me, I repeat myself impatiently . . . I have a theory that Seamless was invented so Americans don't have to hassle with immigrant accents."

Responding to this discomfort with nonnative accents, Agudo asks: "What does it even mean to sound native when so many English speakers are second-language speakers?" Accents are linguistically arbitrary and thus attract purely social judgments, according to Agudo. Regional American ones like a "Southern Drawl" or "Valley girl upspeak" are "nonstandard" and may be subject to mockery and stereotyping, but they are still perceived as native and rarely draw the same contempt as the accents of "language outsiders" (Agudo). What's more, Americans often admire and romanticize British accents, a stark contrast to the reception of Asian accents as "degraded . . . one of the last accents acceptable to mock" (Hong). Perhaps this arbitrary distinction between "native" and "nonnative" accents exists not because we can understand native speakers

better, but rather because we care less to understand people we see as outsiders. This is what makes the "perfect accent" so desirable among Asians in the US: an accent that "is not just inaudible, but also invisible," and therefore palatable (Agudo).

The idea that traces of our culture must be hidden in order to accommodate Westerners extends beyond pronunciation. In his essay "Rude am I in my speech," Caryl Phillips recalls a lunch with his father during which Phillips received the wrong drink and signaled to the waitress to fix his order. His father panicked, asking if Phillips could drink it anyway, to which he responded, "'why, it's not what I ordered'" (11). Despite the waitress's unbothered cooperation, his father remained uncomfortable after the encounter. Phillips attributes this attitude to his father's experience as a first-generation West Indian migrant to Europe; he, like many other immigrants, had to learn "when to remain quiet, and somewhat compliant, and not risk causing offence . . . they were being taught to tread carefully" (12). Hong's father used a similar approach to adjust his behavior to appease Americans. Her father had a habit of saying "I love you" to everyone he spoke with, because "early on, [he] learned that in America, one must be emotionally demonstrative to succeed." Hong speculates, "He must have observed a salesman affectionately slap another salesman on the back while saying, 'Love ya, man, good to see you!'" But her father's adoption of the phrase often comes across as an "indelicate intimacy" when he uses it during work calls or in conversation with strangers, turning his affectionate gesture into an awkward display of borrowed English. His stilted attempts to assimilate—to imitate the banter of those around him—only further revealed his alienation.

Many first generation immigrants adopt a code of quiet amiability to protect themselves—better to say nothing than the wrong thing. Phillips makes it clear that the primary goal of many first-generation West Indian migrants, including his father, was not to become "insiders" in their new country, but to simply be tolerated in public until they could "find some relief from [the] anxieties of belonging" at home or among other

immigrants (12). He goes on to explain that successfully assimilating often means drifting away from their homeland community: "With the [better] job comes a salary increase and perhaps a move to a new neighborhood where there are less of you and more of them" (13). In an op-ed for the *Washington Post* following the murders of six Asian Americans in Georgia, actor Cecilia Kim reflects on her similar experiences in the predominantly white Southern neighborhood where she lived with her first-generation Korean American parents. Like Phillips's father, her demeanor was meek and tolerant. She refrained from complaining even when their property was vandalized with toilet paper and baked beans by neighbors who "saw to it that we were not welcome" (Kim). When they were 'ding-dong ditched' and found a bag of feces on their doorstep, Kim's mother insisted on going door to door to find the culprit and demand an apology. But Kim "pleaded for her to calm down . . . to stay silent. I didn't want to be known as the kid whose mother threw a tantrum in an otherwise 'peaceful' neighborhood." When the hazing and harassment continued, Kim maintained her passive approach, hiding behind the blinds during one prank as four young children jeered "Chinese fire drill!" She recognized that "[her] neighborhood had made it clear that it wasn't okay to be [herself]" and she "[tried her] best to disappear"—a strategy many Asian Americans know well. I too changed my first name so pronouncing it would stop delaying roll call, and my parents would drive to Vietnamese-owned grocery stores in the next town over rather than irritate a white cashier with their accented English. Although it hurts to keep your head down through every racist snipe, to get used to a new name, or to pay for extra gas every week, the fear of being met with a condescending smile or dismissive chiding makes it preferable to comply with our marginalization instead of asserting our presence and asking for cooperation.

Assimilation through reticence is encoded into the "model minority" myth, according to Asian American Studies professor Lisa Sun-Hee Park (135). The term 'model minority' is often applied to Asian Americans who "'behave' appropriately and stay in their designated secondary space without complaint" (135). In her article "Continuing

Significance of the Model Minority Myth: The Second Generation," Park analyzes a series of interviews with second-generation immigrant college students, each describing their parents' reluctance to open up about their early experiences in America. One Korean American student recalls that while he knew money was tight in his family, his parents "[did]n't talk about it too much. In American families, the parent will talk about the hard times, but not Koreans" (140). Another Chinese American student referred to as Sam shares, "My dad was homeless for a while in New York, living in Times Square . . . He doesn't really show any emotion when he talks about it" (138-139). Park observes that there is "no room for sentimentality" in Sam's matter-of-fact story about "immigrant hardships and upward mobility" (139). This softening and omission of difficult experience from the narratives and advice immigrant parents pass on to their children shifts the spotlight away from their encounters with flawed and divisive social structures, allowing for individual resilience and adaptability to be emphasized instead.

The result, for Park, is an intergenerational commitment to conformity where "deviation . . . implies not only a moral shortcoming due to their own individual failure, but also separates them from the American norm" (136). Park finds it ironic that second-generation Asian Americans "who supposedly embody the stereotypical measures of a 'model minority' . . . feel compelled to constantly justify their presence in the United States, a 'nation of immigrants'" (135). But even as Asian Americans perform consistently well in measures of wealth, with Asian American households seeing the biggest growth in income by race in the United States, their success earns them only a "socially marginal" or "secondary space . . . in which Asian Americans, despite their legal citizenship, continue to hold a foreigner status" (Schneider; Park 135). This secondary status, the best the US offers Asian American citizens, "is essential in upholding racial power," as it forces them to "play the foreigner/outsider repeatedly . . . to establish their legitimate membership/insider role within the state" (135, 137). As a result, Asian Americans remain "largely invisible in many, if not most, public policy

discussions." Further, they often only become "visible" when they are"used to dismantle progressive gains—putting Asian Americans in a bizarre position opposite of the interests of other racial minorities, though not as full members of the majority" (143).

While the model minority myth remains prevalent, "many non-whites," as Hong points out, are now rejecting in mass the heightened racism accompanying the resurgence of white nationalism and instead "defending their identities with rage and pride." While Hong recognizes this rage as justified, she questions the "'stay in your lane' politics in which artists and writers are asked to speak only from their personal ethnic experiences"—an admonition that leaves "overlap[ping]" racial identities in a gray area and reinforces a "market logic where culture is hoarded as if it's a product that will depreciate in value if shared with others." The reduction of racial identity to intellectual property causes Hong to question her own experiences, particularly how she has learned, heard, and used English. For example, the backlash against Asian American actress Awkwafina for her "blaccent" in the 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians*—one many Twitter users called out as a form of blackface—took Hong by surprise because of the offending accent's similarity to those of Korean girls in L.A. whom she figured "were just talking the way other teens around them talked" (Jackson, Hong). To Agudo, perhaps Hong's conclusion would be correct, since he defines accents as "simply a way of speaking shaped by a combination of geography, social class, education, ethnicity and first language" (Agudo). Demanding that nonwhite people discard any accent believed to be beyond the boundary of their ethnicity "silo[es]" all ethnicities into something "easier to understand, easier to brand" (Hong). Hong argues that "bad English"—borrowed English composed of multicultural influences, from the slang overheard in L.A.'s K-town to the profanity of her uncle's Black customers in New York—cannot be packaged into a single racial experience.

Unraveling the social boundaries imposed upon racial experience and how to share it, Hong points to writer Jess Row's insight that "America's great and possibly catastrophic failure is its failure to imagine what it means to live together" (Row qtd. in Hong). Both the historical silencing of racial experience and overly rigid guidelines for how to share it prompt Hong to ask, "How can I write about us living together when there isn't too much precedent for it? Can I write about it without resorting to some facile vision of multicultural oneness or the sterilizing language of virtue signaling? Can I write honestly?" Her suggestion is to "speak nearby" rather than to "speak about" other cultures, acknowledging that a shared space between racial experiences can exist, and borders should not be drawn so sharply between them.

Representing the "messy lived realities in which racial groups overlap" calls for more than narratives catered to white consumption or the branding of racial experiences as homogenous commodities (Hong). Hong's resolution to "speak nearby" poses a challenge to contemporary writers by asking them to waive absolute authority over their narratives, but it also offers them the chance to replace divisiveness with cultural mixing and inclusivity. Making inclusive art means inviting others to speak about experiences with which you are unfamiliar and, more importantly, it demands listening to them. When it comes to "bad English," Hong posits, "If you want to truly understand someone's accented English, you have to slow down and listen with your body. You have to train your ears and offer them your full attention." For me, this is an opportunity to be understood not as an exotic outsider with an inconvenient name or a white-adjacent poster child from America's outer circle, but rather as an American who has been shaped by more than solely the customs of the country where my parents came from or the unbalanced social social contract of the country where I grew up. It may be too ambitious to hope that, after generations of making ourselves invisible for the sake of fitting in, our differences will be embraced with open arms. At the very least, perhaps more nuanced representations of Asian Americans as part of our country's

narrative will offer—even as we are scapegoated, targeted, and ostracized—a much-needed reminder that we don't have to earn the right to take up space in our own home.

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