

# The Audacity to Hate

by [Ashley Kang](#)

In January, I was finally naturalized – after a cumulative three-quarters of my life spent in this godforsaken country – as an official US citizen. My family and I went through the ordeal together: denouncing our loyalty to the Republic of Korea, reading the requisite oaths with their long, scary words, swearing not to be communists, and withholding the bitter news from our relatives back home, lest they feel more estranged from us than they already were.

In the days before the big interview, we spent every spare moment huddled around the dinner table, snuggled in bed, or lounging on the couch, preparing, preparing, preparing for the interview. USCIS-certified study guides in hand, we'd toss the 100 civics questions to each other, chortling at how well we'd memorized the answers to US history trivia, playfully gibing each other over the ones we'd persistently forget, and concocting deranged acronyms to cement them in our minds. My parents, particularly my dad, had overprepared. His pocketbook was tattered, dog-eared, circled, underlined, and scribbled over in Korean (English is not his first language) until the pages turned black. My sister and I, thoroughly Americanized, suavely scrolled through PDFs of the study guides we'd found online, maybe two or three times.

The interview itself was pretty anticlimactic. Posturing as innocent, we sat ourselves citizenly in the waiting room, with our hands folded citizenly over the laps of our citizenly-crossed legs. We all passed, exiting one by one from the interrogation rooms – I mean interview rooms, shooting each other furtive smiles and measuredly triumphant thumbs-ups as the next person was called in for their turn. Scrolling through our phones in the interim, we 'Yelp-ed' for some nearby brunch place we could go after the ordeal was over.

James Baldwin, in his essay "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American," offers some consolation for our post-naturalization ambivalence. "No one in the world," he assures, "seems to know exactly what [the word "America"] describes, not even we motley millions who call ourselves Americans" (4). Writing from the vantage point of Europe, he is able to see with newfound clarity the neuroses of identity and self-possession plaguing Americans back home. He goes on to reveal the tenuous mythical strands – cohesion, freedom, justice, and self-assuredness – that uphold our idea of this nation. And yet, it isn't solely with disavowal that Baldwin appraises America, as

though it is a specimen on a petri dish wholly outside of and irrelevant to himself. He claims he was “released from the illusion that [he] hated America” when he began to see past the myths “to which we cling so desperately” (4). Only in audacious confrontations of one’s country and oneself, Baldwin argues, might Americans learn to sift through the lies and, seeing past the mythic illusions of our culture, find its “hidden laws” and “unspoken but profound assumptions” (22).

My family and I are not afflicted by the neuroses of identity and myths about belonging that Baldwin discusses, nor by those suffered by the many Asian Americans I have met and witnessed for the first time in college. Those Asian Americans are the ones who come from what I call ‘Real America,’ where there are Black, white, and “other” people, too, and the American racial hierarchy stands in its typical arrangement where we Asians are not the majority. Those Asian Americans, in their visible otherness, have withstood what I have luckily and narrowly evaded in my hometown of San Jose: the ostracization, the bullying, the squint-eyed mockery. *They* can tell you what it’s like to be in the belly of the beast, what it’s like to be perceived as a chink or gook in America.

My Asianness has actually been so irrelevant, so peripheral in my consciousness as to elude me entirely. I forget that I am ‘Asian’ to other Americans – or at least that being Asian is even supposed to be some othering condition that characterizes my existence. I’d been calling myself Korean American for years prior to being naturalized, affixing the *American* with an easy nonchalance that I’ve largely lost as I’ve grown older and realized how precarious my Americanness really is. I’m envious of my youthful obliviousness, my brazen entitlement to the misnomer “American” when the whole time I had really just been Korean, at best a *Korean in America*. Even when we were on green card status, I had never felt lesser than my American-born peers. As far as I could tell, I had a better vocabulary and could read and write better English, too; if I could beat them at ‘their’ own language, who was to say it wasn’t also mine? Was being *brought* and raised here really so different from being *born* and raised here? We were all here now, by no choice of our own, all the same.

I suppose I had the privilege of operating in the world unconscious of and unquestioned about my race – of having been, in so many words, functionally white. This was a byproduct of my family’s decision to settle in a predominantly Asian enclave in America, where, without having to be white, I could enjoy the trappings of the racial majority and sit on the highest rung of my community’s racial hierarchy. It is why I am less afflicted with an inferiority complex than a deep sense of entitlement – and why I do not have a posture of obsequiousness but of impatience.

If you had asked me then how it felt to be an immigrant American, I would have stuttered and looked at you bizarrely, as if you’d asked me how it felt to have my umbilical cord cut as a baby. What if, when asked now what it means to be an

immigrant American at some diversity-seminar-panel-discussion circle jerk, I retort, “It feels like nothing”? What then? I’m being spiteful, I know – but my spite comes from fatigue. I am tired of reading about immigrants. I am tired of reading about our Lunchables sob stories and rickety-boat ancestral tales: so predictable, so banal. I am tired of the masochistic self-flagellation and neat repackaging of our very dissimilar lives into fodder for more glib white consumption. I am tired of our pathological hand-wringing and clichéd musings about ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘hyphenated identities.’ I am tired of all the groveling to prove, to legitimize our Americanness – our pathetic professions of love for a country that will not love us back.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, an author and fellow San Josean, has grown used to hearing the phrase ‘Love it or leave it.’ He regularly receives angry letters from xenophobic Americans who rebuke his criticisms of the country they share, telling him “[he] should be grateful” to live in the US and accusing him of subversive Eastern loyalties: “You seem to love the communists so much . . . Why don’t you go back to Vietnam? And take your son with you.” But in his pithily titled essay, “I Love America. That’s Why I Have to Tell the Truth About It,” Nguyen insists that loving America is the very reason he must sometimes make unloving criticisms of it. His sentiment is a more emphatic version of Baldwin’s: it is out of *love*, not mere flattery, that Nguyen owes this country his honesty.

When I think of ‘Love it or leave it,’ however, I conjure the 2016 election and realize: *Hey, that’s exactly what Americans do, right?* Didn’t we book flights to Canada at the drop of a hat – or at least threaten to – solely because our democratically elected leader, albeit one of two shitty options, wasn’t the *exact* shitty one we wanted? Has disloyalty now become American? For me, it can’t be. Like Baldwin and Nguyen, I must contend with my tenuous place in this country and assume a Janus-faced posture when trying to reconcile its dualities: “the beauty and the brutality” and the “greatness and . . . horror [that] exist simultaneously, as they have from the very beginning of our American history and perhaps to its end” (Nguyen).

Yet I could never profess my love for America the way Nguyen does. I felt nothing like what he describes as I waved my miniature plastic American flag after passing the interview. I could not nobly “love the substance behind those symbols rather than the symbols themselves,” as Nguyen does, because none of the principles America purportedly stands for – “democracy, equality, justice, hope, peace and especially freedom” – ring true to me (Nguyen). I recoil at the fangs of the American empire and seethe at its disingenuous promises of life and liberty. I weep at its unfettered capitalism and genocidal violence. And I wonder how I could possibly love this country, this disgustingly wealthy country, as it leaves so many people to die from poverty and hunger. This is why Nguyen’s insistence that he loves America is a bit too contrived, too ingratiating for my taste. But maybe that’s more a product of my being a

juvenile absolutist with no tolerance for nuance than his being a bootlicker for Uncle Sam. Maybe it's because he genuinely does love America and possesses a heart more capacious than mine, which is in comparison cold, shriveled, and full of contempt. Maybe he has outgrown my adolescent angst and learned to have more moderation in his criticisms of America and less of my haste to disavow it. But couldn't you argue that these antagonisms of mine – my hatred, my repulsion, my disappointment, my spite – all precipitate from a love that has been wounded, too?

In truth, I yearn to read, to write, and to tell stories about anything, absolutely anything, else. I'm American already: why can't I write with the blithe self-confidence that my Americanness is simply bestowed upon me? Am I only interesting, my stories only valuable, insofar as I don a caricatured persona of the tortured or kowtowing 'other'? Would it be okay if I were brash, ungrateful, insubordinate instead? What about angry, resentful, mean? Would it be okay with you, America, if I ran up to my room, slammed the door in your face, and screamed at the top of my lungs, "I HATE YOU"? Would you then knock at my door and ask me where I am hurting? Why I am in pain? May I, the quiet Korean adoptee, have a turn at being the *enfant terrible*? May I have the audacity to be anti-American?

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## Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American." *The New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 1959, pp. 4, 22.

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