

New World Colors

Ethnicity, Belonging,
and Difference in the Americas

9

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(Re)Constructing Asian-American Identity: Dialectics of Presence/Absence as a Textual Strategy in Sigrid Nunez's "Chang"

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There is every ground to label the narrator of Sigrid Nunez's largely autobiographical short story "Chang" as "made in America"—one can hardly think of any other real or imaginary location where a person could be half-Chinese, half-Panamanian on her father's side, and German-American on her mother's. As a young child, this typically American product of multicultural crossings keeps asking her father questions about "odd" and "improbable" things she hears about the Chinese. His standard reply is "Chinese just like everybody else." She is positive, however, that "he was not like everybody else." What kind of social, cultural, and psychological circumstances underlie diametrical polarity between the father's self-identification and the daughter's perception of his identity? The answer might be prompted by the shifts in the desirable image of self nurtured by the second- and third-generation immigrants to the United States in contrast to that espoused by the first generation. While the "fathers" did their best to eliminate/erase (at least verbally) their too obvious "difference" from "everybody else" (referring, in this context, to the dominant cultural segment—white Anglo-Saxon Protestants), their biological and symbolic "sons" and "daughters" insisted on re-establishing this difference as the only valid foundation for their own identities. This turn is indicative of the dynamics in the vision of self, characteristic of many ethnic groups in the United States. It can be represented as a dialectical triad with the thesis formed by the overwhelming desire to be perceived as "Americans," thus producing a unitary (assimilated) identity. The anti-thesis arises through self-definition as "hyphenated Americans" with the stress on the first component ("Afro-," "Asian-," etc.) also generating a predominantly unitary identity, but with the focus moved to its ethnic component; and the synthesis may be achieved if both elements in the same formula are equally accentuated (pluralistic identity).

As has been convincingly demonstrated, globalization's overt disrespect for geographic, national, and cultural boundaries in the age of postmodernity (with its tendency toward ignoring and, eventually, doing away with them) results, among other things, in the revision of traditional concepts of identity. Responses to these developments, however, vary considerably among different societal groups, depending on their historically evolved centrality/marginality in the public discourse. Western "mainstream" postmodern sensibility readily accepts the shifts in epistemological par-

adigm, discrediting fixed and static identity, and hails the subject's decentralization and diffusion as logical and inevitable. The fact that identities are currently "increasingly fragmented and fractured" (Hall 4) is more or less grudgingly taken for granted. Subaltern theory, on the contrary, holds on to what Coco Fusco, following Gayatri Spivak, calls "strategic essentialism," i.e., a critical position "that validates identity as politically necessary but not as ahistorical or unchangeable" (65).

The dissimilarity in attitudes is primarily accounted for by incredible efforts exerted by minorities in their struggle for self-identity—the category closely related to subjectivity and agency. Henry Louis Gates summarizes the double bind experienced by the marginal critic: on the one hand, the identities to which—and by which—marginalized groups are subjected, and which, therefore, operate as the instrument of subordination, need dismantling. On the other, "actively to dismantle this identity may also be to jeopardize our collective agency" (314). The cluster of issues pertaining to identity looms large among the cultural challenges facing racial/national/ethnic minorities, as well as postcolonial nations. No wonder that, as Hans Bak remarks, "the experience of becoming a part of the 'new' multicultural America means first and foremost a process of negotiating and renegotiating 'identity'" (1). The struggle for it, he continues, takes place at the crossroads of personal and cultural identity, the site of anger, a territory of racial strife and ethnic conflict; but "of necessity the site has also been the theatre of interaction, dialogue and negotiation, of seeking to establish intercultural middle ground as a prerequisite of survival" (1). There is no doubt that race, ethnicity, gender, culture, and religion have historically functioned as the major factors in (re)constituting identity in the U.S.A., and continue to do so. This process, however, can be interpreted from a variety of standpoints, including, in my opinion, the dialectics of presence/absence not infrequently represented in ethnically marked texts through the interplay of negation and affirmation.

The appropriateness of this perspective in the process of (re)constructing Asian American identity is enhanced by the specific Chinese and Japanese experience in the New World, often compelling the new immigrants to renounce their true identity for the sake of a false one. Under severe immigration laws, only the closest in kin to persons of Asian descent already residing in the United States were allowed entrance to the country; therefore, thousands of people had to identify themselves as the so-called "paper" sons and nephews of total strangers. Constantly in fear of exposure, they hid or destroyed any documents corroborating their real identities. As time passed, actual life stories and genuine family ties tended to be forgotten; a person would have only vague memories left of his identity, which resulted in a kind of uncertainty typologically similar to—though etiologically quite different from—postmodern epistemological uncertainty. This status provided ample opportunities for presence/absence oscillations on psychological and cultural levels.

This essay sets out to explore this phenomenon using Sigrid Nunez's story as an example. The text's motive force is the narrator's deep-seated desire to (re)construct

her deceased/absent father's identity, and, therefore, to restore his presence largely neglected by family and society alike when he was alive.

As is known, self-identification is only possible through interaction with others. According to Charles Taylor, "we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us" (79). It is for this reason that the absence of what we call "recognition" on the part of the "others" in control of discourse can be detrimental for an individual or for a whole group. "Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (75). Proceeding from the premise that human identity is "partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others" (75), it can be argued that both, non-recognition and misrecognition, were widely practiced in American society with regard to ethnic Others. As a result, Asian Americans found themselves in a situation described by Elaine Kim as "the non-choice between being either different and inferior or the same and invisible, between eternal alien and assimilated mascot" (xi). Recent Asian immigrants confronted with the wall of non-recognition opted for sameness and invisibility. The declaration "I am an American" asserting their "presence" in the country, simultaneously performed the act of rejecting/negating their racial/cultural difference (thesis). The opposite version of "non-choice," that is, the search for an identity different from the one imposed by the dominant culture, was offered by cultural nationalism with its emphasis on belonging to a specific racial/national community. The assertion of one's difference ("I am an Asian") implied the negation of one's Americanism, reducing it to the state of absence (antithesis). However, constructing one's selfhood based on group allegiance proved to have pitfalls of its own. The concept of identity as a bond, "as the affinity and affiliation that associates those so identified," is ambivalent, as David Theo Goldberg reminds us. It might cut both ways, since "the bond" can easily become "a bondage" keeping "people in who don't want to be in" and requiring their racial solidarity (12).

Consequently, though adherence to monoculture is by no means a thing of the past, today it is increasingly superseded by the vision of identity as a site where diverse cultural streams are free to merge. In Peter Caws's words, "a more humane and generous approach would be to try to acquaint everyone, especially those whose identities are in the formative stage, with the common heritage of the transcultural and the rich variety of the multicultural" (383).

Such an interpretation of identity—not as a static mosaic, but as a changeable and movable process of collisions and negotiations between a great variety of voices and cultures—reveals meaningful links between multicultural and postmodern projects embodied in the principle of pluralism that is crucial for both. Present-day humanities discourse abounds in epithets and metaphors used by scholars in an effort to grasp the elusive essence of this novel and fluid identity—it is referred to as hybrid and borderline, Protean and amphibian... The state of finding oneself between cultures or within several cultures at once that in the past used to result (and can still result) in a

DuBoisean internal split, today tends to acquire a new and positive potential. Neither a final and irreversible break with native culture for the sake of a new one, nor desperate attempts to hold on to it in the face of pressures and impacts, but the third option—combining them through transformation—determines presently the choice of many Asian Americans reflected in their literature. Naturally, this fusion of cultural horizons does not have a general appeal. Some Asian American scholars, for example Sheng-Mei Ma, argue that the cultural encounters between the United States and its citizens of Asian descent can only be identified as “the deathly embrace” embodied in metaphors of more or less violent physical postures/states—from the direct clutch of rape in imperialist adventure narratives to global postcolonial masquerade of ethnicity today (xv). Nevertheless, for the writers choosing to look at an individual through multi-focus optics, the challenge of reproducing ethnic identity presupposes overcoming conventional dichotomies and promoting the vision of identities as productively hybrid. On the textual level, this task calls for an array of specific narrative strategies. It will be my next task to address them in the text under consideration.

Sigrd Nunez’s short story (which is, in fact, part of a larger work) lends itself to being read as an account of the narrator’s journey to the roots of individual and family memory, of her trips to the past, or of her intensely personal, though formally objectified, inquiry aimed at (re)constructing her father’s identity on the basis of lamentably scanty and often controversial evidence. In doing so, she is motivated not only by the desire to redress the injustice towards that quiet, self-effacing man, inflicted by his family’s lack of understanding and sensitivity, but also by a more “selfish” impulse: (re)constituting her father’s self is indispensable for the narrator’s own sense of integrity. Thus, her almost obsessive “detective” ardor is predicated on the urgent need for an adequate self-definition. Consequently, the text assumes features of a “talking cure,” common in much ethnic writing: the act of telling a story, albeit incomplete, chaotic, or internally incoherent, performs healing (“binding”) functions with respect to the narrator’s, character’s, or community’s split self. In order to accomplish her goal, the writer draws upon a variety of narrative resources: the reversal of racial and gender stereotypes (in contrast to Confucian views informing traditional Chinese culture, a man (father) is presented here as meek, while a woman (mother) is strong); textual play with proper names; techniques aimed at creating special auditory and visual effects; a fragmented structure reminiscent of a puzzle (individual paragraphs are spaced); numerous intertextual allusions (in particular, Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* and H.C. Andersen’s *The Nightingale* play the role of intertexts selected as sources of stereotypical commonplaces about orientalized “China”). Her other devices include the use of puns justified by the first generation immigrant’s poor command of English, as well as polyphony—many voices belonging to the late man’s family, his neighbors, his boss, and his doctor are called in to “testify” in the course of the textual investigation.

The accomplishment of the narrator’s self-appointed mission is complicated by the “resistance of the material”—she does not only have to fill in considerable gaps in the fabric of facts that are supposed to resurrect her father for her, but also to peep be-

yond the mask that he has been using over many years as a substitute for his real face. Characteristically, it looked to his daughter devoid of expression, "clay," as if "still waiting to receive the breath of life" (Nunez 372). It seemed to the narrator that the father was "*willing* himself into stereotype: an inscrutable, self-effacing, funny little chinaman" (373). In his study of Asian Americans' representation in popular culture, Robert Lee comes up with six images portraying the Oriental as "an alien body and a threat to the American national family;" they are "the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook" (8). According to this taxonomy, the mask, which the narrator's father is forced to present to the world, is a cross between a coolie and a model immigrant; he is working "all the time" to provide for his alienated and exclusively female family—"All girls—a house full of girls—a Chinese man's nightmare!" (365). Still, even this relatively positive image does not satisfy his daughter who is out to pull the mask off so as to see (or, rather, imagine) her father's real face as an individual and as a multicultural American.

Techniques aimed at deconstructing the "presence/absence" opposition are instrumental for this project. Describing the reader's successive movements in the course of "reading" a text (that is, constructing its meaning(s)), literary theorists belonging to various schools (narratologists, reception critics, semiologists) accentuate the importance—even necessity—of gaps, omissions, blanks, and silences in this process. As Wolfgang Iser aptly remarks,

no story can be told in all completeness. In fact, it acquires dynamics only through necessary gaps. So, when the stream is interrupted, and we are led in an unexpected direction, we are given a chance to activate our own ability to establish links—so as to fill the gaps left by the text itself (285).

Similar ideas are presented by Umberto Eco in his treatment of the "interpretative journey" undertaken by the reader as his/her collaboration with the author—the reader, on the basis of intertextual frames, bridges textual omissions and makes predictions as to the plot's further development that are subsequently confirmed or refuted by the text (cf. 33-34). The hermeneutical aspect of reading, therefore, consists in our (readers') filling the textual gaps through making hypotheses that are later either validated or rejected. In this respect, Nunez's text does not differ from myriads of other texts. But while most of them hide the gaps inside the narrative, Nunez's story brings them to the surface by means of physical/spatial arrangement on the page: the text is made up of eighteen separate fragments separated by spaces of blank paper.

In his book *Maps of Imagination* (2004), Peter Turchi, positioning the writer as cartographer, pays special attention to "blanks," stating that "maps are defined by what they include, but are often more revealing in what they exclude" (29). Blanks can represent both a lack of knowledge, and a deliberate withholding of facts. Nunez's story plays with both possibilities—on the one hand, the narrator knows too little; the "sea" of unknown is much larger than small "islets" of available information, and, therefore, sweeps the pages with its blank emptiness. On the other hand, the narrator's mother, the chief informant, is an unreliable source—in addition to there being "much she her-

self never knew, much she had forgotten or was unsure of," there is also "much that she would never tell" (360). One cannot but agree with Turchi's point that "it isn't the blank that does the work but the material on either side, charged objects creating an electrostatic field. Without anything around or within them, blanks are nothing" (49). Proceeding forward step by tiny step, out of any linear chronological sequence, and sharing with readers every precious bit of knowledge/recollection about her father, the narrator leaves evocative blanks between them, activating the recipient's imagination and inviting him/her to fill the gaps with his/her own surmises. The effect produced is the feeling that we know more about the character than the scanty "bites" of information presented in accordance with seemingly arbitrary and capricious logic of reminiscence. In this way, actual—"present"—facts are supplemented by reader-induced "absent" ones, couching the father's image in an aura woven out of our imagination.

Another "presence/absence" opposition incorporated into the textual arrangement relies upon the trope of *litotes*. According to linguistic definitions, *litotes* consists in a specific usage of a negative structure, that is, in deliberate understatement, employed to achieve a certain stylistic effect. "It is not a pure negation, but a negation that includes affirmation," Ilya Galperin remarks (246). The positive feature here is somewhat diminished in quality as compared with its straightforward assertion, but it is still doubtlessly present in a *litotes*. This duality, perhaps, may be regarded as a correlate to Jacques Derrida's argument that any presence is already inhabited by absence or difference at the moment of a signifying event, which, in its turn, is never a given, but always a product. "A scrupulous theory," Jonathan Culler observes, "must shift back and forth between these perspectives ..., which never lead to a synthesis. Each perspective shows the error of the other in an irresolvable alternation or *aporia*" (96). On the level of rhetoric, *litotes* pushes the recipient towards analogous mental operation—the movement back and forth between assertion and negation.

Let us look at the ways *litotes*-based structures operate in the Nunez text:

In school, or in the playground, or perhaps watching television I hear something about the Chinese—something odd, improbable. I will ask my father. He will know whether it is true, say, that the Chinese eat with sticks.

He shrugs. He pretends not to understand. Or he scowls and says, "Chinese just like everybody else." ...

Is it true the Chinese write backwards?

Chinese just like evvybody else.

Is it true they eat dogs?

Chinese just like evvybody else.

Are they really all Communists?

Chinese just like evvybody else.

What is Chinese water torture? What is footbinding? What is a mandarin?

Chinese just like evvybody else.

He was not like everybody else. (361)

Why does not the narrator say directly that her father was different from "everybody else"? On the one hand, the speech pattern she uses echoes that used by her father, and thus meets the purely rhetoric/euphonic demands of syntactic parallelism. On

the other, her unwillingness to resort to the word "different" might be caused by its stigmatization by the dominant discourse ("different" as "inferior" or "dangerous"). Also, we should not overlook the fact that virtually all the "differences" associated with China in the daughter's questions are derived from popular culture discourse and contain stereotypes implying inherently negative features in the Oriental "Other." The structure selected by the narrator, in our opinion, enables her in one discursive act to assert both her father's uniqueness (due not only to his whimsically intertwined racial roots, but also to each individual's singularity), and his "basic humanity," to borrow Henry Louis Gates's phrase. Direct (negative) and transferred (positive) meanings are simultaneously materialized in litotes, thereby subverting facile pronouncements of (ethnic) oppositions. Owing to this technique, the subject is presented both as "like everybody else," that is, a human being (the truth that has long been not quite axiomatic with respect to minorities), and "not like everybody else," that is, differentiated by his specific position in the world and inimitable individuality. Thus, the narrative avoids presenting him as being trapped in "either/or" opposition, that is, being positioned either as an eternal Other, or as an eternal "invisible man."

Rhetorical devices close to litotes are used by the narrator in a somewhat different manner in the following two examples.

In our house there were no Chinese things. No objects made of bamboo or jade. No lacquer boxes. No painted scrolls or fans. No calligraphy. No embroidered silks. No Buddhas. No chopsticks among the silverware, no rice bowls or tea sets. No Chinese tea, no ginseng or soy sauce in the cupboards ... No dragon and firecrackers on Chinese New Year's. (368)

Apparently, the passage contains an inventory of objects associated with China in the average Western mind; and these are, according to the narrator's testimony, demonstratively absent in her family locus. Why then would she enumerate them in almost painful detail? In order to provide information about their absence the first sentence would suffice—"In our house there were no Chinese things." Period. The long list, however, serves to strike a distinct note of nostalgia. It helps create the impression that the narrator perceives the absence of all these things in her life-space during her childhood and youth—the identity formative years—as a regrettable lack, and concomitantly asserts their presence in her current cultural thesaurus. The fact that they were not there went unnoticed by the young narrator when she "wanted to be an all-American girl with a name like Sue Brown" (369). But their absence jumps into the eye of the grown-up woman in search of her hidden cultural heritage. The act of naming things turns into a performative gesture of reclaiming them, of their spiritual re-appropriation.

A similar method is applied for stating the absence of her father's early photographs.

I have never seen a photograph of my father that was taken before he was in the Army. I have no idea what he looked like as a child or as a young man. I have never seen any photographs of his parents or his brothers, or of Uncle Mee or of any other relations, or of the house he lived in in Colon and Shanghai. (367)

The narrator enumerates visual images that had either never existed in reality, or had been irrevocably lost, but are badly missed by her—she needs them to impart to the constructed figure of her father the plausibility of a real person (whose existence in time is to be proved by material evidence, including photographs). By describing the (absent) pictures that she has never seen the narrator magically brings them to life, conjures them into being (presence). Parallel syntactic structures serve to enhance the invocative potential of words.

Still another variety of litotes:

His closet was the picture of order. On the top shelf, where he kept his hats, was a large assortment—a lifetime's supply, it seemed to me—of chewing gum, cough drops, and mints. On that shelf he kept also his cigarettes and cigars. The closet smelled much as he did—of tobacco and spearmint and the rosewater-glycerin cream he used on his dry skin. A not unpleasant smell. (361)

The last sentence uses a variety of litotes—a structure with two negations, even less categorical in asserting a positive feature of a person or object than the standard pattern. Its selection may be accounted for by the narrator's ambivalent attitude to her father. She sees him bifocally—as a silent, gloomy, and somewhat comic figure from the past she had known since her childhood that did not interest her much (being taken for granted), and as a tantalizingly mysterious stranger with whom she feels an urgent need to come to terms in the present. Consequently, her response to him vacillates between the past indifference and the current fascination, engendering double negation that implies both alternatives.

The dynamic process of negation/assertion transpires also through the play with proper names—having begun in the title, it further punctuates the whole text. The story entitled “Chang” seems to postulate the father's Chinese identity, giving a specific signifier to that highly elusive signified. Still, on the very second page we are told that he is only half-Chinese—he was born in Panama to a native woman, and was called Carlos then, while Chang is only his father's family name. When, following his short sojourn with his father's family, the boy got to the United States, he started being called “Charles Cipriano Chang,” with his first name characteristically anglicized. Upon returning from the WWII European fronts, the young man re-assumes the name Carlos and his mother's Spanish family name. The narrator puts on the table a number of equally (im)probable (and improvable) assumptions as to the motives for this change. Whatever the case, the assertion of one component in his heritage automatically entails the negation of the other, while the essence (his Chinese first name) remains unknown forever:

Hard to believe that my father spent his boyhood in Shanghai being called Carlos, a name he could not even pronounce with the proper Spanish accent. So he must have had a Chinese name as well. And although our family never knew this name, perhaps among Chinese people he used it. (363)

The fact that the wife and daughters are in the dark concerning the most intimate fact about their nearest relation, potentially symbolizes the abyss separating them. The awareness of this abyss strikes the narrator too late—

We must have seemed as alien to him as he seemed to us. To him we must always have been "others." Females. Demons [take note of the reverberating echo of Maxine Hong Kingston's "ghosts" in her *Woman Warrior*]. No different from other demons, who could not tell one Asian from another ... I would have to live a lot longer and he would have to die before the full horror of this would sink in. And then it would sink in deeply, agonizingly, like an arrow that has found its mark. (374)

Lamenting the lack of accurate facts about her father (they are so "incredibly, unbearably few"), the narrator cries out in despair somewhere in the middle of the text: "I cannot invent a father out of these" (374). But, yes she can—in spite of all the lacunae, vagueness, and uncertainty, his patchwork personality is finally, albeit only verbally, put together by means of combinatorial play with absent and present, affirmed and denied elements of the life narratives that complement, corroborate or contradict each other. No doubt, this "father" is no more (but no less!) than a textual construct, and the narrator is well aware of this, pointing out that "he was like a character in a story in the sense that he needed to be invented" (374). The fact of writing the story, giving it a presence in the world, overrides the alleged impossibility of the narrator's task. Functioning first as a rhetorical device on a syntactic level, the litotes eventually comes to play the role of comprehensive textual trope, the trope of assertion through negation, of presence through absence, necessary to reconstitute an ethnic identity not as a fixed given, but as an ongoing process of compromises and (re)negotiations.

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