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Eating is Believing: Exploring the Boundaries and Duality of Cultural Assimilation with Li-Young Lee

One tenet of classic existentialist dogma is that there is no such thing as an absolute truth because our perception is wholly defined by the intangible accumulation of individual, empirical senses conceived by our minds—thereby making all things relative. Subsequently, the dichotomy between reality and what only appears to be real often manifest hand-in-hand. It is within this contradictory and liminal space that we find paradoxes leading to the truth. Such philosophical deliberations take center stage in Li-Young Lee’s poem, “The Cleaving,” where the speaker ponders over a series of ever-complex processes involving the themes of self-discovery and self-invention, of which manifest through the mechanisms of consumption and digestion. Reading “The Cleaving” through the lens of COVID-19, in a world where eavesdropping in on bawdy gossip while standing in line at small mom-and-pop shops is naught but a murky memory—a reflection of our past selves through window display glass, we are reminded of what we have lost, but also of what there is to gain. Lee, and in turn, the speaker, wrestle with the idea that it is our perception of the world which shapes it, ultimately exploring the universality of the immigrant condition and its capacity to encapsulate both what exists, and what merely seems to exist.

Throughout the poem, the speaker grapples with the concept of overconsumption, and how the craving for more only makes oneself feel emptier; these juxtapositions are the thread by which Asian America’s portrait is woven. Li-Young Lee paints the immigrant ideal: a crowded “happy, talkative, voracious” table “at day’s end,” where content and familiar faces gather around and are “eager to eat / four kinds of meat / prepared four different ways, / numerous plates and bowls of rice and vegetables, / each made by / distinct affections / and brought to table by many hands.” Lee plays into the deepest desires shared by immigrant families—to be reunited with those left behind in faraway lands, to rejoice, and to make merry over a hard-won bounty of delicacies. The usage of synecdoche in the line “and brought to table by many hands” evokes the happy image of a communal potluck, where the speaker is surrounded by the fruits of friends and family. By focusing on the word “hands,” Lee evokes the connotations of hard work, laborious efforts, successfully conveying a manifestation of the American Dream. Lee interweaves the classic, postcard-ready image of the model minority immigrant family with the haunting echoes of a ceaseless search for assimilation to drive home this idea of never being enough—too American to be Asian, too foreign to be American. Lee does not, *cannot* dwell on this cheery façade of contentedness for long. While the speaker’s family is first described as “happy” and “talkative,” their final and most definitive features are shaped by desire—they are “voracious.” And upon digging into the bounteous cornucopia before him, the speaker is hit by the feeling of being more alone than ever before, even in a crowded room—he is struck by how “we are nothing eating nothing, / and though we feast, / are filled, overfilled, / we go famished.” He is stifled, smothered—and all together, deeply unsatisfied. Logically, the speaker knows that he should be happy—after all, what more could he wish for other than a place at a full banquet table surrounded by loved ones? Yet he is left unfulfilled. The speaker yearns for

something intangible, longs for something he isn't quite sure exists to soothe the sharp sting of alienation and the waspish disconcertion that haunt the quotidian details of his cross-cultural identity.

Li-Young Lee uses the metaphysical conceit of hunger and consumption to emphasize the futility and paradoxical nature of assimilation. The more he eats, the more empty and hollow—the more *American* he becomes. There is no satisfying what is in him—the gross amalgamation of greed and hope that eats away at the soul of all immigrants, a hunger within us which “will not let / the world be.” The speaker is caught between worlds—his hunger insatiable. He is too Chinese, too immigrant, too firmly mired in a realm of otherness to be American. And yet, he has already tasted the forbidden fruit—it is too late to go back, to forget the intoxicating promise of Americanness upon realising its existence. There is no undoing what has been done. We are left in the present, where the emptiness inside us hungers for belonging, for dreams to come true, for a more tangible connection with America, but to little avail. In this rollicking, volatile melting pot of assimilation, we are subject to “liquid violence” (Lee) and die a thousand mundane deaths every moment we pretend to be good Americans, in a country where our elders crumple under wayward fists and Kung-Flu viruses (Chin). We cannot undo the metaphysical violence we have enacted upon our own bodies, a violence that grinds down and leaves us as nothing but dust. Nor can we forget the very real, physical violence that chokes us, hypersexualises us, and erases us. Lee asserts that as long as we continue to plod on, swallowing down bile and plastering on a bland façade of Americanness, we will cease to exist. In this process of shriveling away, we become hungry ghosts—the absence of existing, after all, being death. Our “standing deaths / at the counters, in the aisles, / the walking deaths in the streets, / the death-far-from-home, the death- / in-a-strange-land, these Chinatown / deaths, these American deaths” are a result of forgetting our roots, and our roots being forgotten by the mainstream. It is within this transitory space between consumption and digestion that we forget ourselves and our culture, and instead become lost and untethered—ultimately ceasing to exist. To be clear—we are not next in line to become white; it is phagocytosis that awaits us, not emperipolesis. We tell ourselves that we will be content after just one more accomplishment, and another, and yet another, until there is nothing left of us but shriveled husks. Lee's prophecies remind us of the danger of losing oneself in the heady rush of pursuing the American Dream. If we forget ourselves, then there truly is no end to the grind; only oblivion awaits.

It is within these seemingly ceaseless circles of consumption, change, and self-invention that the speaker is finally able to eschew the normalising forces of American culture, and instead cleave to and take ownership over his ethnic identity. Lee expands the metaphysical conceit of eating to encompass not only the violent and turbulent acts of cultural digestion and assimilation, but also to the idea of reading—thereby gaining agency via knowledge. He broadens the depth of field in which eating is typically portrayed in to loop in the multidimensional acts of opening up one's stomach to foreign foods and the subsequent acts of breaking down those molecules to incorporate within oneself, drawing parallels between the act of reading, and opening up one's mind to new schools of thought. The speaker elucidates that his “my reading a kind of eating, my eating / a kind of reading,” further compounding upon the idea

that both eating and reading are acts spurred on by hunger—the need to take in the unknown, the other, and render oneself whole via the path of self-discovery (Lee). As the speaker slowly learns how to better take in the other without losing himself, he builds awareness of how to articulate the unique space in which he operates as an immigrant—building solidarity across ethnic divides in resistance to the exclusionary rhetoric of middle America. Only now is he able to escape the hollowness, the transitory space in which he once forgot himself and look to “the way [he] watched others before [him] do,” and embrace the “sensual, salient nowness” of eating that “[punctuates] the void / from which such hunger springs and to which it proceeds” (Lee). He grounds himself in this intergenerational, almost primordial knowledge, that he once tried so hard to digest and eliminate from his system. Intentions clear, he is now free to eat and engage with collective memories as to absorb knowledge, ultimately rejecting his once insubstantial, passive existence in favour of taking control over his multifaceted ethnic identity.

In acknowledging the oftentimes messy and intersectional daily reality of being an immigrant, the speaker begins to see himself as an active actor capable of deciding his own destiny rather than a mere stage prop, subject to the whims of America. Lee dissects the racist ideologies tightly woven throughout American history, and decries the hateful language “that according to Emerson,” characterizes Chinese people as having “*the ugliest features in the world*” (Lee). In this moment, Lee supersedes the voice of the speaker, and directly addresses the racism preserved within American literary tradition. Lee highlights the dehumanising and homogenising mechanisms present within the United States that encourage immigrants to shed their culture and ethnic pride in order to avoid standing out too much. The presentation of Chinese features as grotesque and therefore subhuman is the same rhetoric that has welcomed racialized violence; and according to Emersonian ideals, all Chinese must have a “wide nose to meet the blows / a face like that invites” (Lee). Lee then asserts that these anti-Chinese sentiments are applicable beyond a single ethnic group. Racist homogenising ideals apply across the board, to all racialised and marginalised bodies. And so, it is under this umbrella of racism that cross-cultural unity can be formed. After all, Emerson’s remarks do not differ much from other vitriolic speech, stemming from historic to modern-day, that implicate and justify racial superiority and privilege. The speaker is able to understand this too, through consumption. He eats Emerson’s racism, deconstructing it from the inside out and learning from it in order to present his rebuttal—instead of falling prey to ethnically-isolating and racist rhetoric, the speaker chooses to look beyond his own existence and reaches out in solidarity. In the place of dehumanising diction, Lee concludes with that of ethnic solidarity: “He is / my sister, this / beautiful Bedouin, this Shulamite, / keeper of sabbaths, diviner / of holy texts, this dark / dancer, this Jew, this Asian, this one / with the Cambodian face, Vietnamese face, this Chinese ... / this man with my own face” (Lee). The speaker’s face, which at the beginning, was solely defined by racist rhetoric as Chinese, has metamorphosed into an amalgamation of many. These diverse and markedly different faces are all bonded together by an esprit de corps fashioned out of rejection, perception as the other, and centuries of being labeled as undesirable—even subhuman. In choosing in solidarity, we supplant our empty existences with new ones where we have the power to choose our allies and shape who is our

family. We no longer feel alone, even in a crowded room. In looking beyond the shallowest semblance of existence that is reflected in the mirror, the speaker is able to see what truly exists and links us together. Instead of accepting sameness, Lee calls for these vastly different groups to rise up in a heterogeneous form of unity in order to create a sustainable form of cultural assimilation and appreciation.

Lee dissects immigrant America's complex inner turmoil derived from the constant pressures of cultural assimilation, digestion, and manifestation. The speaker labours through various forms of self-invention and self-discovery as mechanisms of coping with living as a racialized body in the United States, ultimately finding unity in the paradoxical conception of being one with the heterogeneous grouping of the immigrant experience. In redefining what it means to belong, Lee establishes a new, intersectional normal in which immigrants are able to embrace being third-culture rather than be confined to a binary existence. Historically, epidemics have broken open our lives, left our viscera quivering on the operating table for all to see. This time is no different.

We can choose to swallow it whole, force down the glut of disproportionate Black and brown COVID-19 deaths with a bitter chaser, and drift into a restless, amnesiac fog under the guise of a food coma. Or we can stitch ourselves together, humbled, whole—ready to imagine a new world. And build a new table we will, one where there is a seat for everyone.

Bibliography

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