

# Seeing Jay-Z in Taipei

*Hua Hsu*

My father left Taiwan for the United States in the mid-1960s at the age of twenty-one. He would be nearly twice as old before he returned. In the interceding years, a willing maroon far from home, he acquired various characteristics that might have marked him as American. He studied in New York, witnessed and participated in student protests, and, according to photographic evidence, once sported long hair and vaguely fashionable pants. He accidentally became a Bob Dylan fan, thanks to second-hand exposure through the floorboards of his apartment building. He subscribed, very briefly, to *The New Yorker*. He acquired a taste for pizza and rum raisin ice cream. He and my mother spent their honeymoon driving across the country, and among the items that have survived my parents' frugal early years are weathered paperback copies of the bestsellers *The Pentagon Papers* and *Future Shock*. For a brief spell he toyed with anglicizing his name and asked to be called Eric, though he soon realized that assimilation of that order did not suit him.

I often try to spin these details into a narrative of my parents' early years in America. How did they imagine themselves? How did they acquire a sense of taste or decide which movies to see? Did any minutiae betray some aspirational instinct, a desire to fit in? Would they have recognized themselves in *Future Shock*? And who was the influential Eric after whom my father had named himself, if only briefly? These were the raw materials for their new American identities, and they foraged only as

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far as their car or the subway line could take them. In those days, as my parents never tire of reminding me, their sense of identity was bound by geography: proximity to these American effects, on one hand, and profound distance from home, on the other. Back then, they explain, it required a small fortune and months of careful planning to return home. They remember, with the kind of nostalgic fondness assigned to experiences that need not be repeated, that when they were young like me it took weeks simply to schedule a long-distance phone call and ensure a quorum of the family would be available on the other side of the line.

This specific detail has long captivated me. What must it have been like to leave home willingly and cross into a different world, with only the haziest plans for return? I could not fathom the idea that the rare phone call and the occasional transpacific letter – which might announce a future phone call – constituted the entirety of their connection to their gradually more distant homeland. In the absence of available connections, they held on to an imaginary Taiwan, more an abstraction, a beacon, a phantom limb than an actual island. The available technology could deliver them home only occasionally. So they would search for traces of it in the faces of their classmates; they would hear it wafting above the din when they visited Chinatown. My parents – usually rational, reserved, mellow people – would drive hours in search of neighboring immigrant colonies that promised Chinese restaurants, grocers, newspapers, and marathon lunches with old classmates. It was the same for my father's entire collegiate graduating class, all of whom pursued their futures abroad. Any encounter was enough to nourish them and remind them of who they were.

Of course, they had chosen all this: the occasional loneliness, the itinerant lifestyle, the language barrier. They had arrived to study at American graduate schools far superior to their Asian counterparts, though the reward for such a mad pursuit had not yet come into focus. Despite their acceptance of this fact of displacement, what they had not chosen was to relinquish the place they held in their hearts in order to become Asian Americans, a category then coming into fashion. They had little in common with the American-born Chinese and Japanese students organizing on the other side of their campuses for free speech or civil rights; they knew nothing about the Chinese Exclusion Act, Charlie Chan, or why one should take deep offense to the slurs "Oriental" or "chink." My parents and their cohort would not have recognized that they were representatives of a "model minority." In fact, they hadn't even planned on becoming Americans. It's not that they were unconcerned: they simply did not know such categories of identification – national, racial, ethnic – were available to them. Their allegiances remained with the communities they had left. They subscribed to a narrative of return, and for the most part, they were not deeply invested in where they fit in the American racial landscape, even as it reoriented itself to accommodate their kind.

Many of them – my parents and their classmates, clustered at engineering schools – were the moving pieces in someone else's grand abstraction, one that promised flexibility and improvisation rather than the strict contingencies of identity politics. "For the first time in history," wrote the urban theorist Melvin Webber in 1964, around the time my parents arrived stateside, "it might be possible to locate on a mountain top and to maintain intimate, real-

time and realistic contact with business or other associates. All persons tapped into the global communications net would have ties approximating those used today in a given metropolitan region.”<sup>1</sup> A visionary of telecommunications, Webber was one of many 1960s theorists and planners to describe a future in which traditional notions of “identity,” tied to geography or tribe, would no longer matter. Instead, advances in technology would allow us access to the world’s farthest corners, inaugurating a new era of global simultaneity. Encounter and contact, the Grand Tour, and ethnographic exploration would no longer be the pastimes of the intrepid few. As the distance between here and there was abridged, Webber foresaw global possibilities: “By now there is a large class of persons around the world who share in the world culture, while simultaneously participating in the idiosyncratic local cultures special to their regions of residence,” he observed in a later essay. “Their range of opportunity is far larger and far more diverse than the most powerful and wealthy man of past eras could have imagined.”<sup>2</sup>

What were these men “imagining?”<sup>3</sup> This vision of “world culture” was meant to supplement, possibly even supplant the more local expressions of identity that had arisen in the 1950s and 1960s. We had to rebuild our beleaguered urban centers, Webber and others agreed – riot-wounded places like Watts, Newark, and Detroit. But in this “post-city age,” we also had to anticipate the new social configurations of the future beyond the quaint, limiting city and the provincialism of local spaces. Suddenly, “encounter, contact, communication” were no longer problems. This revolution in “global communication” would be fomented and fine-tuned by people

of my father’s generation. As an engineer, *Hua Hsu* he was essentially building a bridge back across the ocean, one made of silicon chips and wafers, circuits and microprocessors, the essence of a computer and the raw materials of the digital age. He was helping solve the problem of cheap, efficient communication that had been one of the defining limitations of his early years in America. The great distances that once separated various human outposts – that mystery of what lay beyond – had inspired artists and inventors and entranced conquerors, explorers, travelers, stowaways, and heads of state. Now there were better things to think about. Posed another way: why affiliate with arbitrary categories of race or ethnicity when connectivity empowers us to seek out those with whom we share interests, opinions, or background?

But what if our imaginations do not progress accordingly, at the same rate as theories or technological advances? What if we are unable (or choose not) to imagine something beyond the simple yearning for home comforts, or the tendency toward tribalism? The problem with such universalist thinking is its tendency to efface difference: to offer an inevitable, common future as antidote to our disparate, occasionally contentious pasts. While my parents had been pragmatic and unsentimental about the decisions that landed them in the United States, there was something about their relationship to their identity that defied such reason; it was irrational, if not steadfastly provincial. It was something that seemed to emerge instinctually.<sup>4</sup> Over time, as I approached the age they were when they left home, I became mystified. I carefully listened to my parents’ stories about coming to the United States, desperate to locate some

bit of myself in their wanderings, unexplainably hopeful that some essential quality had passed through generations and geography to me. I wanted to feel some primordial connection, if only to shade in some long-imagined vector of my identity. It was an intoxicating, mysterious, secondhand nostalgia. If anything, with ease of travel and globe-spanning technology, this desire only grew. The advances of “world culture” did not efface the need for identity politics or resolve the past’s yearnings; it merely gave that need a wider platform, new articulations, unheralded claims.

Years later, when my father returned to Taiwan to pursue a job, this problem of distance returned – only we now had the technology to bridge it nightly. We bought a fax machine. Each night my mom and I would detail, in the smallest type possible, our daily activities. Each morning, before I left for school, his return message would be waiting for me. Faxes gave way to email, which was rendered quaint by Skype, and so on.

Taiwan was no longer a mere abstraction for them, but it remained a mystery to me. That distant place provided an approach to questions of identity that were frequently posed in terms of black and white. I spent most of my vacations there in middle school and high school, and upon each visit, I felt ever more dislocated. Was I just another American, my faint grasp of the spoken language an unbridgeable gulf? Or was I, warmly welcomed by my parents’ Taiwanese born-and-raised friends, just another version of them?

To import American racial categories achieved little. The notion of “Asia” is not immediately intuitive to many within this continental grouping, and the lassoing of different Asians into the category *Asian American* once they enter the United States seemed, to those over there,

vaguely laughable. Which is not to say that the legacies of familiar racial hierarchies were invisible. When my parents were growing up, a famous toothpaste brand throughout Asia was called Darkie; its yellow box was illustrated with a garish black man in a top hat, his black skin the void out of which shone a set of impossibly white, sparkling teeth.<sup>5</sup> In Taiwan, Darkie toothpaste was probably the closest many came to encountering an actual black person, just as seeing Rock Hudson and Elvis Presley (whose hairstyle my uncle would dutifully mimic) in magazines or on television constituted their exposure to white Americans, intrepid Christian missionaries notwithstanding. Converging in these figures – the grinning cartoon minstrel, the debonair leads – were specific origins, histories, and contexts. But projected across the Pacific, they could seem like degrees of the same American effect.

“We are all bewildered by the movie,” young Rio Gonzaga remarks, “which is probably too American for us.”<sup>6</sup> The movie in question is *A Place in the Sun*, George Stevens’s 1951 adaptation of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, and Rio’s environs – the 1950s Manila of Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* – are not ideally suited for this tale of forbidden love and murder, which stars Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, and Shelley Winters, among other models of alien, American beauty. Rio’s envies are familiar: the “casual arrogance” of a “modern” American heroine, the “blond, fair-skinned” looks of her own cousin Pucha.<sup>7</sup> And while Rio and Pucha hail from the local elite, in relation to the American splendor they see on-screen during their retreats to the air-conditioned movie theater, they are only marginally more privileged than their lowly chaperones.

But there is something about Rio's relationship to this American otherness that resists it. Though not yet critical of her adoration for exclusively white stars, she is beginning to understand that this is someone else's version of the good life. For Rio, the margin of her privilege manifests itself in an awareness that this American film was not meant for her, even if she finds something seductive in its images, themes, possibilities. "I decide that even if I don't understand it, *I like* this movie," Rio explains, and her desire to translate this feeling of bewildered enchantment into something more concrete distinguishes her as one of the novel's most astute voices. She doesn't understand America, yet she draws closer, and with caution.

This is how much of the world first experiences America: as an image. Once as a racist tube of toothpaste, now as a YouTube clip of kids in Oakland inventing a new dance. Today, this range of images is far greater and less singular in quality; American culture no longer privileges the fair-skinned cowboys or superheroes exclusively. Accessing America from abroad is no longer the fancy of the affluent or the intrepid. The infrastructure for the "post-city age" exists: the logic of social networking websites or crowd-sourcing and the proliferation of cheap, efficient cellular phone technology mean that we are connected in previously unimaginable ways. There is the famous, oft-repeated story of Max Perelman, an American college student lost in western China in the late 1990s. He encountered a group of Tibetans traveling to their capital, Lhasa. They had never wandered far from their village; they did not know what a camera was. At one point, while partaking in a feast of raw meat, one of the wandering Tibetans asked Perelman, how was Michael Jordan doing?<sup>8</sup>

There is something familiar, possibly even heartening about this anecdote. It flatters our sense of how connected the world is or can be. Even in a remote strip of Central Asia, Michael Jordan is recognized. But what lay beyond this mere fact of recognition? Did these itinerant Tibetans perceive Jordan as an African American – a pioneer of black style and status and (prior to the election of President Barack Obama) possibly the most famous black man ever – or just as an American? Were they familiar with his skills as a basketball player or his interchangeability with Nike? Which version of Jordan did we hope to project? Which qualities stayed affixed to Jordan as his image traveled the globe?

I was visiting Taiwan with my parents in Fall 2006 when I learned that the rapper Jay-Z was bringing his elaborate world tour to the Taipei Dome. Jay-Z's status as hip-hop's iconic 2000s hero was already, at the time, assured. This tour, with United Nations-cosponsored dates throughout Africa, was ambitious and, in some way, heartening. It was supposed to make him a global presence, and not just in London and Tokyo. Each time he left an African city – traveling beyond Cape Town and Johannesburg to Dar es Salaam, Accra, Lagos, and Luanda, too – startling photographs of Jay-Z aiding humanitarian water security missions, touring rural lands in modest, utilitarian dress, or meeting heads of state would circulate the Internet. These photographs suggested new collective possibilities.

This had long been hip-hop's promise. When the former gang leader-turned-DJ Afrika Bambaataa became hip-hop's first philosopher in the early 1980s, he imagined a form that would be voracious, inclusive, and global. Anything with a beat could be assimilated into his genre-resistant DJ sets: why couldn't he and the

young men and women of the South Bronx found a culture on roughly the same principle? The cosmopolitan possibility of hip-hop was captivating, and as it traveled the nation and then the world – thanks to epochal singles and one-hit wonders, bootlegged documentary videos and self-published magazines – its potential for change grew as well. For the most optimistic, hip-hop’s global reach was predicated on its capacity to coalesce different groups around notions of justice or foster a new creativity perched on the possibilities of “sampling.” This cultural form was a piece of my identity, and it was founded on a sense of community or “nationhood” as abstract as my parents’.

Hip-hop’s entry into the cultural mainstream introduced a new kind of proud antihero to the American imagination. Even as the music produced a multibillion-dollar industry, allying itself with the forces that had once tried to stymie its growth, there was a sly and almost residually subversive quality to it. The music became a business, and the artists blossomed into savvy, swaggering businessmen. Men like Russell Simmons, Sean Combs, or Jay-Z were unimaginably famous for reasons beyond music. Often, they were the least powerful men in the boardroom – but the only ones who, with a squint or a frown, could make everyone else feel uncomfortable, beholden to their charisma. How far could this *swagger* take us?

The rise of hip-hop and the general “colorization” of American culture prepared us to see ourselves anew. Demographers predict with some degree of certainty that, in the next three decades, the population of the United States will finally become “majority minority”; it will be the “end of white America,” at least to the slab of the population that

finds any meaning whatsoever in those vague, fraught words. To those who recognize that minorities are no longer token contributors to our cultural self-image, this news only confirms what has been felt for some time. The audience for such news will have experienced a culture that moves free of city or space, where mixture and multiculturalism are valued. The primacy of the idea of “whiteness” only makes sense in isolation, abstracted from history or culture, protected from the larger, global flows of majorities and minorities within which Americans, white or otherwise, will always fall into the minority category. Whiteness will only matter insofar as people continue to choose the category, to validate it with their hopes and fears; along these lines, perhaps hip-hop has charmed the world’s stage more successfully than “white America” (if such a concept still holds) ever did.

But did hip-hop’s importance as an intervention in America’s racial hierarchy, if only cosmetically, travel? Was its global rise predicated on a vague black coolness or its symbolic overturning of a heretofore lily-white American order? How far could style translate, and was it a sufficiently durable, transferrable, translatable quality?

From the American perspective, these issues formed the subtext of the photographs of Jay-Z, the living embodiment of hip-hop’s victory. The photographs were his appeal to all who had ever considered themselves members of the underclass. They portrayed a globally famous black pop star returning to his ancestral lands, rewarding their patronage with an image of success. One could have anticipated different versions of these photographs dispatched from all the obscure parts of the globe where he would perform. This tour was not for America; it was for the rest of the world.

We grafted our struggles onto his, and now the rest of the world could do the same.

As I approached the Taipei Dome and spied the throngs of locals, all of them recognizable as versions of the “global citizens” I grew up with in California, I thought about that symbolic victory for the underclass. As an American versed in the codes and meanings of hip-hop, I was a somewhat protective spectator. Did the triumphs that Jay-Z represented translate? Were people here to revel in the spectacle, or to share in acts of subversion? When the local fans thrilled to every move of the opening act, a Taiwanese rapper named MC Hot Dog who had carefully studied the playbooks of his American peers, I scoffed. His very name made me cringe, yet the fans adored him. After a brief intermission, Jay-Z took the stage. The audience sat politely through most of the set, rising only in the presence of the easy hits. I felt an irrational sense of alienation. Perhaps this, in a way, was hip-hop’s victory. A local version had mastered the moves, and at least the fans could understand what MC Hot Dog was saying: he both rapped in their language and filled his rhymes with defiantly local references. He was oppositional in a way they could relate to.

The divide between Jay-Z and the audience only widened as the evening dragged on. Often, it seemed they had only the faintest clue what he was talking about between songs, and his raps lost them altogether. The African American star’s swaggering charisma didn’t translate either. Still, the spectators craned their necks and climbed atop seats merely to see an American in our presence, validating this market by showing up. They may not have understood him, but they knew they were supposed to like him.

“We relate to struggle,” Jay-Z shouted to the audience midway through his progressively lackluster set. “We relate to y’all.” It was a somewhat generic thing for him to say, more a performance of empathy than a gesture of sincerity. Struggle: such a common, universal, oft-uttered condition. Could solidarity really be forged through so vague a notion? What were the consequences of taking one’s struggle abroad? Was Jay-Z actually introducing the youth of Taiwan to a new vocabulary for understanding their lives? Where “struggle” in the American context might describe the minority’s struggle against a power structure or cultural mainstream, here it meant something else. What hip-hop helped achieve in the United States was the victory of the image: kids of color, kids with attitude who could not be underestimated – who took that underestimation and made billions of dollars off it. But projected abroad – and complicated by language – hip-hop’s valences were different. In the context of American race politics, it represented the ascension of an underclass, and its effects could be felt economically, politically, and even spiritually; in Taiwan and elsewhere, hip-hop could just as easily represent the ascension of American culture in general.

Efforts at solidarity approached farce later during the concert, when the enormous screen behind him flashed the logo for Jay-Z’s record label, ROC (short for Roc-A-Fella, a riff on Rockefeller). The crowd awakened with ferocious, unexpected energy. In Taiwan, “ROC” reads as the abbreviation for “Republic of China.” The name is a reminder of Taiwan’s strained relations with the Chinese mainland. Some argue that Taiwan and China must reunite, while others rally for formal independence: this schism, in some way, defines Taiwanese

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identity. The crowd assumed that their American hero was referring to their struggle.

From a distance, the bare facts of this scene might describe the “world culture” of Webber and others. But within this set-piece of globalization, the translations – of culture, symbol, language – remain vexed. The coming together of different localities does not always result in the kind of solidarity we would have hoped for. In this case, was it empathy, or something else? What happens when these immense distances collapse and we surrender our long-held, reliable notions of authenticity or essence, memory and imagination? As the opportunities for new moments of contact proliferate – and as the figures and images circulating along those pathways change as well – what will be the basis of our “world culture”? Do these notions of struggle, community, or identity politics translate across such vast spaces, or does the astonishing rate of circulation loosen them from intent and meaning?

The circulation of images happens at a rate that is either terrifying or exciting, given your age. Suddenly it is impossible to ignore the interconnectedness of American fates with those worldwide. Many Americans were introduced to this idea only recently, in the wake of 9/11; others may have read it in our shoes and socks, shirts and appliances, most of which are crafted overseas and will travel farther distances than many of us ever will. The circuits that implicate us are infinite. Against such a backdrop of extreme possibilities and energies, what of our older allegiances to seemingly outdated notions like race or ethnicity? Those who venture to America, as my parents did forty-odd years ago, no longer face the same light homesickness. Wherever immigrants live, they

now have their own strip malls, shopping centers, and newspapers. Indeed, the predictions went slightly awry. Instead of creating a “world culture” of uniform desires and tropes, the new flows of information merely gave coherence and credence to more micro-regionalisms. Categories of identification became segments of a market share, and the logic of this “world culture” became that of the neoliberal market or a social network online.

This outcome is a version of what anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff describe in their book *Ethnicity, Inc.* There was a certain kind of claim, the Comaroffs explain, to essence or invisible affinity, which was supposed to wither away in the modern age. We were supposed to stray from binding myths – of origin, tradition, belief, and culture. The seemingly archaic, vernacular meaning of community was supposed to flounder in the “post-city age,” in which geography was suddenly incidental, or at least surmountable. These new associations, it was predicted, would cause the abstract, not-quite-rational core of identity politics to shrink, causing us to act more rationally or sensibly toward the world around us. We would access far corners of the world as an endless stream of images and data, customizing our preferences and tracking usage statistics along the way.

Instead of advancing past our provincial affiliations, however, we have found reasons to return to and properly mark these delineations. The feeling of authenticity, that alluringly vague line dividing two tribes, the abstract outline of a community, could now be monetized. New forms of consumption activated identities in novel, almost chillingly pragmatic ways, creating a need to crystallize or codify boundaries that previous generations had never thought to demarcate.

There is *belonging* in the nebulous, homesick sense, and there is a legal type of “belonging,” which entitles you to claim a piece of a Native American gaming casino or an obscure, mountainous Japanese tea ceremony. “Neither for consumers nor for producers,” the Comaroffs write, “does the aura of ethno-commodities simply disappear with their entry into the market; sometimes, as we have seen, it may be rediscovered, reanimated, regained.”<sup>9</sup> We know that identity can enter into commodity relations – the idea that blackness can signify “cool” to American consumers or that an ethnic rite can be trademarked. But to presume that this marketability automatically compromises the integrity of that identity is to presume a kind of original authenticity, which simply locks us in a circle. Instead, the Comaroffs’ idea of the “ethnicity industry” is useful for considering what entry therein does *not* guarantee. The rise of entertainment marketed specifically to white Americans – the Blue Collar Comedy Tour or auto racing are two sturdy examples – might help us reorient our understanding of racial hierarchy and the emergence of a white claim to identity politics that follows the example of actual minority groups. But accepting the fact of the “ethnicity industry” discourages us from scrutinizing related broader notions: the very *idea* of blackness or whiteness, for example.

The conditions of identity haven’t changed so much as our ability to articulate, choose, express, and complicate them has. The end of white America – a numerical majority – is assured; the end of whiteness – an idea, a hegemonic center – will not die so easily. The paradox of all these new ways of articulating and embracing difference – of customization and connectivity, lifestyle choices and segmented markets – is that

they rely on a shared, universal logic. We possess unprecedented forums for instant, global contact, but too often this connectedness merely means that we are implicated as slivers of a market whole. Rarely does the potential to connect on a global scale embolden us to seek mutuality or discover radical new possibilities for feeling and transferring empathy. Perhaps this is asking too much.

Furthermore, amidst all this possibility, it becomes difficult at the individual level to feel all that unique or original. How does one orient oneself in a sea of such endless connective possibilities?

As I began recollecting the scraps of conversation that constitute the opening pages of this essay, I had to take care to remember what was mine and what I had read in someone else’s memoir, or overheard in a class. Was the shape of this narrative cliché or easily predictable? Did I just rearrange the details of my parents’ lives according to a recognizable script? It was like that line in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* about the impossibility of distinguishing Chinese Americanness from the unique weirdness of your own family.<sup>10</sup>

It was a somewhat generic strategy on my part, though, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has observed in his discussions of culture, “[O]ne is bound to be formed – morally, aesthetically, politically, religiously – by the range of lives one has known.”<sup>11</sup> Just as markets exist for a certain kind of by-the-bootstraps ethnic art, its opposite now courts audiences as well. This is exactly the form of ethnic knowledge Nam Le assails in his recent short story, “Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice.” Le describes a wry, frustrated young Vietnamese-Australian writer at the University of Iowa’s

M.F.A. program. He struggles to complete a final assignment. “How can you have writer’s block?” a friend (presumably white) wonders. “Just write a story about Vietnam.”<sup>12</sup> But he resists, even as instructors assure him that ethnic literature is “hot” and lusty literary agents encourage him to mine his “*background and life experience*.” Ethnic literature is “a license to bore,” its stories stocked with “flat, generic” characters and “descriptions of exotic food,” his classmates decry, and Le’s young proxy in the story agrees.<sup>13</sup> Instead, he chooses the righteous path: he writes fantastical stories about vampires, assassins, and painters with hemorrhoids.

There is something disarming about Le’s seemingly ironic take on identity, the way the short story anticipates readerly expectations. It’s a knowing, bracingly logical put-down of ethnic literature – and from an insider, no less. When the story turns, slightly, upon the arrival of the young writer’s father, a witness to unimaginable wartime atrocities, it is unclear whether the reader is merely being set up for a savage fall. After a series of wrenching, relationship-advancing conversations with his father about his experiences during the war – the type of wondrously food-filled conversations the characters within the story mock – the young writer begins writing his “ethnic story.” It abides by certain generic conventions, and it vio-

lates every rule he and his friends have agreed upon. Ultimately, his father cannot accept his son’s desire to fictionalize the past. But he chooses to write it.

There are specificities we lose when we surrender to the universal, a fear that Le’s short story seeks to express. It does not overcome the stinging criticisms Le’s characters set out for their creator, nor does Le seek to reclaim or own such stereotypes by turning them on their head. Instead, Le embraces identity’s current contradiction: he wants to have it both ways, to possess and control his identity, but without being completely beholden to it, without letting it over-determine his actions. The story is skeptical and ironic about identity politics while passionately defensive about our right to claim our sense of self.

The final paragraph in Le’s story begins, “If I had known then what I knew later, I wouldn’t have said the things I did.” The writer’s father has just destroyed the only existing copy of his son’s story, and a strained relationship is about to disintegrate altogether. This writer – so unimpressed and otherwise ironic – never reveals this secret. He keeps it for himself, to defend his father. Certain details in this life simply cannot be assimilated into a larger whole, whether that whole is a story or a market economy. They should be allowed to serve no end.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Melvin Webber, “The Urban Place and the Non-Place Urban Realm,” in *Explorations into Urban Structure*, ed. Melvin Webber, John Dyckman, Donald Foley, Albert Guttenberg, William Wheaton, and Catherine Wurster (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 79 – 153.

<sup>2</sup> Melvin Webber, “The Post-City Age,” *Dædalus* 97 (4) (Fall 1968): 1099.

<sup>3</sup> I am reminded here of Arjun Appadurai’s stirring discussions of how globalization – another way of approaching Webber’s “world culture” – expands the imaginative scope

of its subjects. See Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," in *Globalization*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 2001) and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> While these forms of sentimental yearning were important to people like my parents, I do not want to overstate or generalize their effects. Aihwa Ong, for example, has written about how flows of migration and capital across the Pacific have inaugurated "flexible," pragmatic, new approaches to citizenship. See Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Over time, and in what ranks as possibly the most tepid exercise of political correctness ever, the manufacturers of Darkie toothpaste decreased the resolution of the image so it was merely the shadow of a black face and renamed the toothpaste Darlie.

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters* (New York : Vintage Books, 1990), 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Lafeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York : Norton Books, 1999), 14.

<sup>9</sup> John L. and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2009), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York : Vintage Books, 1975), 5 – 6.

<sup>11</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (London : Oxford University Press, 1991), ix.

<sup>12</sup> Nam Le, *The Boat* (New York : Knopf, 2008), 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.