

Plural of Me—A Narrative of Asian American Women through Art and Music

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1. When soft voices die by Melissa Hui | Art: Plural of Endurance | Theme: Fears

A: “My parents, in an effort to protect me, always taught me to stay in my lane. Do as you are told, don’t stand out, don’t rock the boat, don’t speak out. These protected my parents from trouble when they first arrived here, and I know they meant well when they passed on their lessons. I clearly remember the day I heard about the Atlanta shootings. I wanted to scream and cry - to see on the news how people who looked like my mom, my grandma, and my friends were targeted was too much to keep in. Sure - I have experienced hate before - someone telling me to go back while I was grocery shopping or even my patients saying they don't want the China flu. But this - this was a breaking point for me. What angered me even more, was that...people were so reluctant to call it a hate crime. In the news, and even my own therapist (who no longer is my therapist) - said that oh no this isn't targeted towards AAPI women. Is this what staying in my lane has led to? the silencing of our experiences that people can’t even see us when we are victims of violence? I am fearful for my mom, my friends. I stopped going to my local grocery store because a worker made a comment about my Asianness. So now I ask my partner to go or I drive further for food. But I am also still afraid to stand up against the hate because...what if I am next?”

E: I've had the pleasure to be residing in New York City, where there is a lot of Asian representation. However, not all is pleasant. Especially since the beginning of the course of COVID-19 reaching the states, there's been a sharp increase in hatred and violence towards Asian people. I feared to step in the subway when there were barely any riders back in early 2020. My fears remained for a year that I avoided taking the subway although it was a necessity while I was living in Manhattan. From time to time, I am still a target of harassment. During broad daylight, some folks would yell at me at Central Park while I minded my own business. They often get 'triggered' and yell hurtful insults such as telling me, "Go back to China" . I have learned to tune these hateful comments out, but the fear still remains inside me. There were times, a few tried to throw objects at me such as trash, but I was lucky enough to have avoided any injuries. It surprises me and baffles me that my physical attributions can anger someone so quickly.

B: “I was taking a graduate class with ALL Asian women and NO ONE talked about [the Atlanta shootings]. The lack of talking or telling these stories was very taxing - I had a mental breakdown. I couldn't do anything and I'm still struggling with that now. The trauma is not over...” ...“Part of the journey [as a Malaysian American woman] now is the AAPI hate crimes - there was a shift of - now this is something I can’t take off, even when I wear a mask. Asian American women in grocery stores wear big sunglasses and masks and hats and it doesn’t work to conceal. This fear started to set in...The fear really set in. This identity is now a source of a problem. It shifted the way I was seeing. I was coming to terms that this is happening and how do I start letting go of fear and experience and hope for the best.” ...“I think about if I get attacked, what should I do? Pepper spray?”

There are layers and layers of fear and identity. I have a rule of not spending more than twenty to forty minutes in a place.”

Y: “as Asian women, as immigrants, there is always this focus on assimilation and how to assimilate but not stand out, even if you can’t help but stand out. How can you pretend that you’re not something but everyone else will always see you as something else? I went to the eye doctor for many years, and the doctor said I don’t speak English well but I’ve been here for so many years. I couldn’t say anything....there is an understanding that I don’t say anything. I had this mentality to not stand out. Don't wear anything that will draw any attention to me. Don't cause a fuss. If someone cusses at you, don't engage.

D: “I used to have low self-esteem because I thought I looked ugly. Now, I feel self-conscious by how Asian I look, especially when I drive to places where there are only white people like in the middle of Kentucky....During the pandemic, I was so afraid for my friends and family, even more than for myself. Will my parents be attacked next? I had one Cantonese friend who was almost hit with a pick-up truck at a gas station. The man in the truck threw up his middle finger and yelled ‘fucking Asian’... And then you would hear in the news about Asian elders being attacked for no reason. I couldn’t understand what was going on. What can I do to protect my own parents? I don’t even live near them anymore..”

2. Breathe Life I by Kyong Mee Choi | Art: Plural of Being | Theme: Representation and Stereotypes

A: I feel like people want to put Asian American women in a box and when we don’t fit in their perceptions of who they think we should be...the response can be cruel. I remember when I was doing my clinicals, I worked so hard to be prepared for medical rounds - I spoke up during rounds, offered to share journal articles I came across, and talked to patients and their family members to make sure they were doing ok. My supervisor called me in to give me feedback and said that I was being too “competitive” and too “aggressive”. I think any of my friends and family members who know me know I am anything but competitive or aggressive (the only caveat maybe watching UNC/Duke basketball). But I was crushed - I tried to hold back my tears but then started bawling as soon as I left the room. Being a young and impressionable professional who was looking for good letters of recs, I took that feedback to heart. I started silencing myself, pulling back. Fitting into what this person thought an Asian American woman should be - meek, docile, quiet. Now as I have moved up on the career ladder and look back, I realized I don’t have to change to fit in - people who hold onto these biases and stereotypes and the systems that support them do. And if I want to change that, I have to be authentic and not fit anyone’s box. I wish I can go back to my younger self and tell myself “no baby girl - you do you”.

C: "I watched Partner Track and I was reading the comments on why do we count representation as long as an Asian female has a white male lead because that's been bothering me for a very long time. Why is it not possible for AAPI women to be shown properly for what they actually are? The balance between a stereotype versus what is perpetuating a stereotype. And then we count those as good representation."..."I am glad we have more AAPI representation in media but I understand when that representation is the same twenty people because they can only do so much. As an AAPI

woman in the creative field, I would love for us to share unique stories because one thing I noticed...whenever we get asked about our identities we tend to gravitate to saying the same things...but that's not going to make you see the nuances. And granted they have the same stories but a lot of times i hear interviews we hear the typical stuff like doctor, engineer, lawyer...I almost wonder...in trying to appeal to the mainstream, we are creating new stereotypes for ourselves. There is a struggle to appeal to white audiences while appealing to our own community and how do we balance those two things?"

B: "One thing that makes it hard [being Asian], is having read on orientalization and fetishization and imperialism. And how that is an undeniable part of my history not only in Malaysia which was colonized by the British but part of Japanese imperialism. I am disgusted by the fact that AAPI women are seen in categories of different aspects of our lives. Not really the male gaze ...more so the expectations of other people through the lenses of other people. People expect this of me. The expectation of my motivation to be versus my own expectation.

W: "I think that the hardship and challenges come from an intersection of all identities and experience that is hard to identify as an AAPI woman. I am very comfortable being an enigma but that's why I love it. When I am clearly not labeled then I can be whatever I want. Having the freedom to Be."..."There are a lot of nuances we have and nuances is where I want to be...life is lived through the details. It's the undercurrent where I like to live and breathe because it's the sexiest thing. It's the place where our human experience gives way to our spiritual beings where we can have conversations where it's not clear but embrace the muddiness of it all."

D: "At a meet and greet party in a senior living facility I was performing at, I was introduced to the crowd as 'from the Asian, we have the gorgeous...' I just smiled and laughed but I felt so uncomfortable. I remember feeling so conflicted, because I wanted to call her out for labeling me in that way but I didn't want to be rude. I was brought up to be quiet and not to "talk back". Now I want to educate others, but when is the right time and place to do that? I am more than just Asian. I am someone who struggles with self-worth tied to my career successes. I am someone who constantly compares myself to peers I think are doing better than me because they own a house already. I struggle with trying to please my parents, especially since my younger brother makes more money than me. But I am also someone who cares about education and my students. And I work hard in everything I do because I care. I spend extra hours outside of work to think about how I can challenge my students to be critical thinkers. And I hope people can see that part of me."

3. Carillons à Musique by Liliya Ugay | Art: Plural of Identity | Theme: Identities

Z: "First time coming from China, at America I didn't feel American. But at China I didn't feel familiar as well. I just had feelings of sadness. I don't identify with America or with Chinese. Customs and way of living are just not the same. We follow the holidays...But in our bones it's not ours."

E: I was born and raised in South Korea and my family moved to the United States in 2009. At this time, I was not quite an American or a Korean. Immigrating to a new country was not easy as a teenager. My family struggled from the language and cultural barrier. I became a cultural broker by

being a translator. I was responsible for translating 'adult-things' like reading utility bills. I had a good English accent, yet I struggled in English. People assumed I was a native English speaker. Deep down, I was a little, angsty teenager who feared to say hi to others because that would lead to striking up a longer conversation that I was not able to keep up with.

C: "When my parents were raising me, they raised me with English...they should have taught me our dialect. But now I am trying to learn my own mother tongue to preserve the small things...how I would say mom, dad, grandma and grandpa...language is a very small connection point to be able to relate to my culture and something I want to pass on...just the names and monikers."

X: "I first recognized I was different when I moved to Texas when I was six. And neighbors asked me all these questions where I came from, out of curiosity. I had never thought about that or was even aware of the things they asked. When I grew up around Filipino families in Chicago, I didn't think anything about it. When I moved to Texas, I felt weird and different from them. The woman piece played a role more in middle school. I grew up in West Texas where I developed interest in boys and many of the boys didn't want to have me as a girlfriend because I was different from my West Texas friends. I felt gender played a role, but it was more rooted in race. I thought if I was a blonde female, they would like me more. In my career, I felt [race and gender] were more prominent when I moved into academia and moved into a leadership role. When I was in meetings with people or with more seniors, then the makeup of the people were mostly men and mostly white. I didn't always feel comfortable speaking up because of my perception that I wouldn't be received."

Y: "I did [feel lonely] for a while but again, being pulled into a community was very helpful. If I didn't, I could have thrown out my identity...I do know where that has happened. If you don't get accepted, it can feel like you are ostracized."

C: "I grew up in a very white dominated area in school life. One thing I give a lot of credit to my parents is they put me in Chinese school which was my first introduction to my culture. When I started getting to middle school, when my personality was forming, I was able to pick out my characteristics. That's when I drifted away from my culture because it wasn't popular. TACAS was an extracurricular group that provided a lot of arts and culture opportunities as well. Because our family friends went through it, my parents thought it was a good idea for me and pushed me to do it at the end of eighth grade. I remember I went to a party for the youth group and met all the other kids I didn't know well and they were all Chinese. And that's when I realized I'm not weird and it's ok to be into other things...I went from being an anomaly to being basic. I went through a huge shift going into high school interacting with my youth group and my weeks were regular White experiences and my Saturdays were very cultural and I looked forward so much to the weekends. In high school, my friends noticed a shift in me and noticed I didn't have as much to contribute in conversations at school. They were all involved in band, theater, and drama. But I was involved in Chinese dance, dragon dance practice and they said you only talk about Asian things and I said that's my life. Once I got into UNC, I went into full Asian and I embrace every single second of it."

A: “I think I am at that point in my life where I am taking more control over my life - who gets to be in it, who is deserving of my energy, what deserves my attention and care. And I think I am starting to place myself in the center of it. When I look back at all the women in my family, they always took care of others. My grandma lost her mom very young and had to raise her sisters by herself...my mom had to figure out a way to take care of me and her own family when she left for the US. All the women in my family were busy taking care of others to make sure their future children live a better life. To be honest I had this huge feeling of guilt - like my family suffered so much just so I can have a better life so I better work hard and give it my all - I can't waste their pain. It was to the point where I developed this need for perfectionism that took a huge toll on my mental health - an eating disorder for a perfect body, depression from a low sense of self worth even when I was making good grades and doing well in school. My parents, despite the tiger mom stereotypes, never really put that pressure on me. It was solely me recognizing the trauma my family experienced and the need to live up to their sacrifices. Now as I approach the age of wanting kids, I realized that I understood it all wrong. My family didn't want me to be perfect. They just wanted me to be happy. I am now in therapy and unlearning a lot of the trauma. And now I am starting to place myself in the center of my life. I am slowly seeing that being perfect isn't the answer to heal my family's trauma. Just existing is.”

C: “My mom has never taken off her jade bracelet. She asked me ‘Why do you want one? It's so old, it's so old fashioned’ and then my mom got it for me. And now I wear it all the time.”...

D: “I felt so controlled by my mother growing up. I didn't have room to make my own choices. People told me it looked like I walked around with a dark cloud over my head some days. My mom would always criticize everything I did, the way I talked to people, the way I walked, the way I washed the dishes. I had to do all the chores while my brother did not have to do any. Now that I've grown up, my relationship with my mother is better. I think she respects me a little more, even though she still tells me I need to make more money. But I guess she'll always view me as her child. I think she did the best she could, because she probably also went through her own traumatizing childhood back in Taiwan. Actually, I think when she was growing up, her father didn't even want her to go to college. So that probably already tells a lot. We're just all trying to learn how to do life the best we can with what we have.”

5. ... by Eunseon Yu | Art: The great dream . 美梦 | Theme: Resilience and Empowerment

C: "I will say one thing: I have been thinking of giving credit to my parents. When I was younger, whenever we had international festivals at Raleigh, the dragon dance done by our youth groups was always at the beginning. And at the end, they had dance performances by each country and I would go backstage and see the Chinese kids in one corner and everyone would be running in and out. I remember seeing that and I'm very proud and happy to see all these generations. We are all Americans and yet we are still able to hold onto a lot of our culture...I just think that is so cool"

W: “In my entire life I have been fighting boxes and I don't know if I still identify as Asian American. They project their own thoughts on what we are supposed to be and I have always fought that and it doesn't represent the totality of me.... Everybody assumed I was Dominican, but everyone was struggling and life was about simplicity and survival, so nobody cared. We were too busy trying to survive to fit each other into boxes. Indians, when growing up, didn't know what to do with me

because I didn't fit into a mold. It's a struggle I have always had but I have turned that into my superpower. There is such a belongingness in people of color....we just include.”

W: What happens to our soul? Where do I call home? What I love most [about being Asian] is the familiarity, the warmth and welcoming, the invitation to people's inner lives that are so real and authentic. I feel things viscerally activate when I am in my culture. I am sure there is some ancestral thing going on that has a power to touch but the warmth and welcoming...there is just love. When an elderly meets me and their wrinkly hands go over my face, there is just welcoming.”

W: “Through all of the trauma we face, and there IS generational trauma, we struggled but there is a strength to our trauma. We are very resilient....There is so much resilience in who we are and what our ancestors have given us. There is a complexity of what we inherited but I come from a lineage of people that bounce up. They have the generational and ancestral support so even when I am not there they can access the pain and transformational healing.” ...“There is such an unconditional love and warmth in our culture. We are so welcoming.