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Contradiction and Culture: Revisiting Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" (Again)

> And after seeing, once again, my mother's disappointed face, something inside me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink, and when I saw only my face staring back—and understood that it would always be this ordinary face—I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror.
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> And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me –a face I had never seen before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so that I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. (Tan 1265)

Two conflicting kinds: the sad and the angry, the prodigy and the failure, the American and the foreigner. How is it possible to live concurrently in diametrically opposed realities? I'm not comfortable with the dichotomies in my life, but they are familiar. I am a great satisfaction to my mother. I have been a student at the most prestigious schools in the country. I am kind and thoughtful, smart and sensitive, hardworking and diligent. *No, that's not right;* let me try again. I am a great disappointment to my parents. I have been a failure at the very best schools in the country. I am selfish, perverse and relentlessly lazy.

In the spring of 2001, I read Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" for an evening class in the craft of fiction. I sailed into class that week, confident that I understood the story. It was about the second type of girl, the selfish and perverse one who disappointed her mother. I recognized the first-person narrator. After all, I saw her every time that I looked in the mirror. In this story, Jing-mei, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, "failed her [mother] so many times," beginning with a disastrous piano recital at age nine. Instead of practicing and memorizing Schumann's "Pleading Child" for the talent show recital, "I dawdled over it, playing a few bars and then cheating, looking up to see what notes followed. I never really listened to what I was playing. I daydreamed about being somewhere else, being someone else." Worse yet, in the aftermath of the performance, Jing-mei spitefully lashed out at her mother by bringing up her dead sisters who had been lost in China during the revolution:

> "Then I wish I weren't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother," I shouted. As I said these things, I got scared. It felt like worms and toads and slimy things crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, that this *awful side of me* had surfaced, at last.
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> "Too late change this," my mother said shrilly.

> And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that's when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. "Then I wish I'd never been born!" I shouted, "I wish I were dead! Like them."
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> It was as if I had said magic words. Alakazam!—her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless. (1270-71; emphasis added)

At one point in the story, her mother's summary of Jing-mei seemed accurate and eerily familiar. "Not the best. Because you not trying." The mother claims that she just wants her child to do her best and try her hardest. As I read that mother's words, I heard my parents and countless childhood teachers talk of the ways in which I did not live up to my potential. With that understanding of the characters, I was happy to explore the cultural and familial pressures on Jing-mei, the reasons she might choose to reject those pressures and the consequences of that rejection, but fundamentally, I believed the mother's assessment: a willful girl. And Jing-mei seems to believe it as well:

> It was not the only disappointment my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her many times, each time asserting my will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn't get straight As. I didn't become class president. I didn't get into Stanford. I dropped out of college. (1271)

I had an uncomfortable shock in class that evening when I discovered that the teacher did not agree with my interpretation. She even implied that the mother was the wrong-headed one while the daughter had been wronged by her mother's unrealistic expectations. I was disturbed partially because I hate performing poorly (and I'll come back to this point later), but even worse, my interpretation seemed cold-hearted in comparison to other people's reading of the text. Why was I so sympathetic to the mother who is clearly pushy and determined to control her daughter's life? During the fight following the recital, the mother is violent and even cruel as she watches her daughter cry:

> She yanked me by the arm, pulled me off the floor, snapped off the TV. She was frighteningly strong, half-pulling, half carrying me toward the piano as I kicked the throw rugs under my feet. She lifted me up and onto the hard bench. I was sobbing by now, looking at her bitterly. Her chest was heaving even more and her mouth was open, *smiling crazily as if she were pleased that I was crying.*
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> "You want me to be someone that I'm not!" I sobbed. "I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!"
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> "Only two kinds of daughters," she shouted in Chinese. "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!" (1270; emphasis added)

Yet, I was ready to view the daughter as the aggressor in the relationship. The mother was the victim.

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During the same week when I read the Amy Tan story, I was in the midst of a conflict with my own mother. I was trying to decide where to attend graduate school after receiving acceptance letters from several universities. According to my parents, those schools could be lumped into two kinds: Harvard and not-Harvard. Each time I spoke with my mother she asked if I had made a photocopy of my Harvard acceptance letter for her. In those conversations, she would sigh deeply and dramatically and say, "After all, getting a copy of your letter is the closest I will ever come to attending Harvard." My father's comments were a little more pointed. "Of course, you can do what you want. I won't try to influence you, but it would be foolish not to go to Harvard." It rapidly became clear that not enrolling there would not just be turning down Harvard but also rejecting their hopes and dreams. It was also clear that they thought my only reason for considering the other universities was to be perverse and contrary or possibly even to spite them. At thirty-two, I found myself having ridiculously adolescent arguments with them in my head in which I claimed that they did not care about my happiness, they wanted to control me and they did not understand me. Like Jing-mei, I thought furiously, "I won't let her change me ... I won't be what I'm not." God alone only knows what they were saying to me in their heads.

Many families have their stories that get told over and over again, the tales that are meant to direct and explain the family members' lives. These stories become the lens through which we interpret the world. My family's story is of the immigration and struggle that allowed me to grow up in relative privilege. My mother immigrated to the United States when she was ten from her home in rural Jamaica. My maternal grandmother had already been living in Boston for five years, cleaning houses when she sent for her children in order to give them educational opportunities. My father's father came to America from Trinidad at age fifteen in hopes of attending high school; instead, he ended up working two jobs—on the janitorial staffs of Harvard University and a local bank. The story is heavily laden with references to the Caribbean, to the unknown Chino-Trinidadian ancestor who gave my paternal family our slanted eyes and to the sacrifices that my grandparents made for my chance to receive an education. The African-American ancestry of my remaining grandparent (my paternal grandmother) is scarcely ever mentioned perhaps because it doesn't fit the mythos. So there was the first tension: I was African-American yet West Indian. To the white person the difference between the two cultures may seem negligible. To some black folks, the difference can be a chasm.

Along with the story of immigration from the West Indies, I often heard the myth of my immediate family's existence as struggling blacks. The ac-

tual truth is my parents are well off. They own no wealth and few assets but they both have professional jobs with a high enough income to borrow their way into an upper middle-class suburb and take out loans to send their children to elite schools. I grew up in a comfortable lifestyle. While I may not have had the horseback riding lessons and the cotillions of some of my white classmates, my parents clearly had more money than the majority of my black friends in both secondary school and college.

Like all African-Americans, I developed what W.E.B. Du Bois called a double-consciousness as I saw the world through a fractured lens of race and culture. The sense of disconnect was even greater when I heard my parents say things such as "you will have to work twice as hard to prove yourself and be twice as good to succeed as a black woman in this country" while white friends and their parents claimed "you'll get in, get chosen, get accepted because of affirmative action. Because you're a black woman, you don't have to be as good." And black classmates jeered at my ignorance of black popular culture. Meanwhile there was always the intrusive voice of the media, which said that being black and being unsuccessful were synonymous identifiers.

Growing up in a predominantly white setting meant constantly facing white racism but even worse, it meant alienation from other blacks. Although I was called a nigger a few times, I was mostly treated as exotic by whites for whom I was a curiosity or an exception. The cruelty from blacks stung more; I hated being called an Oreo, sell-out or later an assimilationist.

I can't recall much of my years at Exeter. I'm not one of those high school teachers who can lovingly recall the support of her own high school teachers or the class that made all the difference in fostering my love of writing and literature. Most of my Exeter memories focus on my friends, my boyfriends and my job in the school dining hall. I loved working in the dish room, stacking dirty plates on one end of the conveyer belt dishwasher and pulling the steaming hot clean ones out of the other end. In retrospect, I'm not sure why I liked such a filthy job. Partly, it was the excitement of getting a weekly paycheck, but perhaps it was mostly the feeling of community behind the lines. Though my financial aid package was primarily loans and a job, rather than the large grants and scholarships of some of my classmates, I still got a thrill from the "us vs. them" of having a work-study job.

I can remember scolding a wealthy classmate for not bussing her own tray. "You wouldn't do that if you were one of the kids who has to clean up in here," I pointed out. "Ah, but I'm not." she smiled. I professed outrage, but I relished the moment when I ran back into the kitchen to repeat her words to my co-workers. "Rich Bitch," we all agreed. And I told that story many times over the next few years as a symbol of my allegiance to the other African-American students at the school.

Perhaps I was not much of a scholarship student at Exeter (or for that matter at MIT where I held another series of work-study jobs including caf-

eteria work), but somewhere between middle school and college, I stopped wanting to fit in with my wealthy white classmates. I stopped being embarrassed to invite white friends to my house, which was one of the smallest homes in a suburb full of large houses and even mansions. Instead, I became vaguely uncomfortable when black friends saw that I lived in a rich town (albeit in one of its less expensive neighborhoods). I was desperate to avoid more experiences in which I was not seen as "black enough."

My parents had always taught me to be wary of whites but rejection by other blacks was akin to rejection by family. I doubt that they realized their choice to move to a white suburb would hinder their children's ability to straddle two worlds—an ability that is innate to my parents because they spent their youth socially immersed in Boston's Black and West Indian communities even while they attended predominantly white schools.

My mother wears different identities depending on her surroundings. These identities are reflected by her various accents. Most of the time she uses a very educated and proper accent; however, when she goes back to the island or is around family, she falls into the patois of her Jamaican childhood; lastly, reserved for African-American friends, she uses a Black English vernacular, which I can only imagine comes from several years living in a project in Roxbury as a teenager. The code-switching is natural for her. She does not seem bothered by the implied contradictions. She embraces each accent without embarrassment and uses the dialects freely, although I could not tell her an uninterrupted story as a child because she was so vigilant about correcting my grammar. While she feels whole in her multiple identities, I feel fractured as I try to be both African-American and West Indian, as I try to live in both the white world and the black. For me, my multicultural heritage means that I am always cognizant of the tension of being pulled in different directions.

Jing-mei's narration explores similar tensions. There is the voice of the immigrant—her mother is a housemaid like my grandmother:

> My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous. (1264)

I recognized this mother, the cleaning woman who believes that America is the land of wide open opportunities, where hard work is rewarded (at least in comparison to the grinding poverty of the West Indies). Like many immigrants, the mother *both wants her child to be American and fears her daughter's Americanization and the accompanying cultural changes.* At one point in the story, they watch a Chinese girl play the piano on television. "The girl had the sauciness of a Shirley Temple. She was proudly modest, like a proper Chinese child." The daughter who tries to live up to these expectations is doomed to failure. How can one be "saucy" and "proudly modest"

at the same time? How can one be simultaneously a Shirley Temple who is so representative of white American ideals and an ethnic minority child? Seemingly, the only choice is to live in two alternate realities.

The ever-present Hollywood images that saturate our culture underscore the contradictions that face a minority child. Rubén Martínez, an author of Mexican heritage, writes in *Half and Half*:

> Over the years, Hollywood's given me great and terrible things—a culture as tangible as the mix of race and ethnicity I grew up around—and somewhere between my "reel" and "real" lives lie my deepest beliefs and my greatest fears, my nightmares and my dreams. As a kid and now an adult with a perpetual identity crisis, Hollywood has been a constant mirror for me, and what I've screened has resulted in validation and self-loathing, vindication and betrayal ... I was raised in a swirl of cultures that at times melded seamlessly and at others clashed violently—a contradiction that exists in the very heart of Hollywood ...
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> Of course I fell in love with Natalie Wood's Maria, which placed me firmly in white-kid Tony's shoes ... and a white girl named Wendy [from school] was in fantasy my Natalie Wood. Only in hindsight can I see the irony of a brown kid who thought he was white and desired a white classmate standing in for a white woman playing a Puerto Rican. (248-50)

Why is Natalie Wood playing a Puerto Rican in West Side Story? How does a brown kid end up identifying with the white hero? How does a Mexican child make sense of the term "Latino"—not a race but often treated as one in the United States? Again, the only choice is to exist in multiple realities until the rifts between the self, the perceived self, the media self, and the imagined self grow deep like gaping cracks.

For a long time, my life has reflected alternate realities. I went to schools that underscored my successful fulfillment of my parents' dreams. Look at my performance at Exeter (high school), MIT (college), and the Iowa Writers' Workshop (graduate school) and you will see a top student with the top grades, a student winning prizes and prominent in the extracurricular life of the school. Blink and then look again; you will see a young woman so self-destructive and bent on self-sabotage that she was unable to thrive, a person who was physically and emotionally covered with scars by those experiences. Even now in my early thirties, some days like Jing-mei at the beginning of the piano recital, I am sure of my future success as a writer. Simultaneously aware that she hasn't practiced and very confident that her prodigy side will make an appearance, Jing-mei floats up to the stage:

> I had on a white dress, layered with sheets of lace, and a pink bow in my Peter Pan haircut. As I sat down, I envisioned people jumping to their feet and Ed Sullivan rushing up to introduce me to everyone on TV. (1269)

These are the days when I send out manuscripts, write papers, apply to doctoral programs and generally set out to conquer the world. Other days, I am so afraid of failure that I can barely rise out of bed. I understand Jing-mei when she says, "something inside me began to die." I wonder sometimes if those events, being asked to leave Exeter because of the self-sabotage, being unable to live in the dorms at MIT for the same reason and suffering from writer's block at Iowa were similar to Jing-mei's refusal to play the piano. Perhaps they were a giant way of saying "no" to high expectations, a negating of familial hopes "for something so large that failure was inevitable." Or is my interpretation of those dramatic failures merely a way of assigning blame away from the real culprit? Perhaps the real culprit was not my parents' expectations, but the media that categorizes us and demands that we fit certain stereotypes: the shiftless black, the hard-working immigrant, the ambitious learner, the happy Negro or the creative but crazy artist? Although I tried, I could never find a way to embody all those identities at once. Martínez describes the disembodiment that came with seeing the characteristics that he was supposed to embrace. Unfortunately, I am very familiar with this feeling of dislocation and disassociation. It is exactly the feeling that I have amidst my moments of rage and self-destruction.

> It is a strange experience: you are disembodied as you laugh at the image that represents you on the screen. Your consciousness splits and, in a desperate attempt to survive the humiliation, identifies with the subjectivity of the culture that made the film, no longer with the objectified body that once belonged to you. Lose your body a few hundred times as a kid, and a reservoir of pain and rage starts to build up inside you. (253)

As a child and young adult, I was desperate to fit in. I swung wildly between wanting to blend with the whites around me and wanting to be "more black." Recently, my biracial cousin who also grew up in a white suburb told me that during her freshman year at Wesleyan, she joined the Black Students Union and always sat at the black table in the cafeteria. Her words reminded me of my adolescent embrace of African-American and West Indian music, literature and culture –as if there are only a few ways to be "more black." None of these attempts worked. Rubén Martínez writes of the same experience as he left his childhood white neighborhood (near Hollywood) and he threw himself into learning Spanish, writing anti-white manifestos and exclusively dating Latinas:

> It was only a matter of time before I turned away from my whiteness and became the ethnic rebel. It seemed like it happened overnight, but it was the result of years of pent-up rage in me. No matter how hard I tried to live out my "colorless" fantasies, deep inside, in some corner of my psyche where it was difficult for the pain to find the words, much less ideas, I always sensed my outsider status and yearned to fit in, completely somewhere . . .

> After so many years trying to play the Cowboy, I wholeheartedly took the role of the Indian . . .
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> *Both were fantasies, beautiful lies, Hollywood constructs.* (256-57; emphasis added)

Martínez goes on to write, "The truth was that I was always both, that dreaded ambiguity—and how Hollywood hates ambiguity." Somehow, Martínez is learning a way to be both without contradiction. I am not yet able to resolve the contradictions in my life.

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Jing-mei's mother said "Who ask you to be genius ... Only ask you be your best. For you sake. You think I want you to be genius? Hnnh! What for! Who ask you?" At the same time everything she did emphasized her plan for Jing-mei to be a prodigy and her belief that Jing-mei could be a genius if the girl would only try. This contradiction drove her daughter away. This contradiction mirrored all the other contradictions facing the girl: American vs. foreigner, white vs. Chinese, obedient vs. powerful. During the final scene of the story, the contradictions are reconciled. They still exist but Jing-mei's perception of them has become integrated:

> I opened up the Schumann book to the dark little piece I had played at the recital. It was on the left-hand page, "Pleading Child." It looked more difficult than I remembered. I played a few bars, surprised at how easily the notes came back to me. And for the first time, or so it seemed, I noticed the piece on the right-hand side. It was called "Perfectly Contented." I tried to play this one as well. It had a lighter melody but with the same flowing rhythm and turned out to be quite easy. "Pleading Child" was shorter but slower; "Perfectly Contented" was longer but faster. And after I had played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song. (1272)

I'm not sure that I understand the catalyst for her reconciliation. In my original interpretation, the change was sparked by Jing-mei's comprehension of her own behavior—meaning she understood that her deliberate self-sabotage was a vengeful act towards her mother. I thought that the mother forgiving the daughter for this act allowed Jing-mei to move on. Upon reevaluation after class, I assigned some blame to the mother, and it seemed clear that the epiphany was caused by Jing-mei's forgiveness of her mother's unrelenting pressure. Now neither interpretation seems right. Jing-mei has found peace, but I don't know how. Perhaps her mother's death at the end of the story released her. Perhaps Jing-mei just grew a little older and wiser. And as much as I would like to understand, I don't know that understanding would necessarily illuminate my own path.

I am envious of Jing-mei's discovery and by the way some of the writers in *Half and Half* have learned to integrate their experiences. Martínez still

find the balance precarious. He calls his new understanding of himself the "third phase of my cultural maturation in which I'm exploring the interconnectedness of it all." He writes:

> ...things don't look as black and white as I once believed them to be, the color lines not as fast. The Virgin of Guadeloupe was always there, right alongside my Brady Bunch visions ... Perhaps the one thing the Cowboys and Indians (gringos and Mexicans) have in common is their denial of the complexity of their identities. It strikes me that the story of America's past and present segregation is all the more ironic and tragic, for the way that the colors really do bleed into one another (I mixed that metaphor on purpose), and have done so all along ...
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> And so I can celebrate what I feel to be my cultural success . . .
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> I am both Cowboy and Indian.
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> But my "success" is still marked by anxiety, a white noise that disturbs whatever raceless utopia I might imagine. I feel an uneasy tension between all the colors hating and loving them all, perceiving and speaking from one and many perspectives simultaneously. The key word here is "tension": nothing as yet has been resolved. My body is both real and unreal, its color both confining and liberating. (10)

I decided to go to Harvard. How could I refuse the legacy that I've been handed even if the weight sometimes seems too much to bear? For a brief moment, my choice crystallized, I could once again choose the prestigious and powerful—there I could live up to my family's expectations. Or I could choose a place that appeared less pressured and say no to their dream. Did I make the right choice? Maybe. Will I be a fantastic success or fail dramatically? I don't know, perhaps both. It has occurred to me that my mother's insistence on Harvard may indicate that she is not as comfortable with her multiple identities as she appears; she may consider the "educated" accent to be the best or at least the most powerful. My grandfather was a janitor at Harvard, and I will receive a doctorate in Social Policy from the same institution where I will study race, school desegregation and educational inequality. It is a marriage of the immigrant's American dream and concerns uniquely African-American. Perhaps this marriage is my version of Jing-mei's reconciliation. Perhaps not.

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