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*Elisabetta Marino*

***Looking at America  
from the Eyes of  
Asian American Children***

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by



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As many Asian American writers pointed out in their fictional and non-fictional writings, the history of the immigrants coming from Asian Pacific countries and settling in the United States has been characterized by sufferings, discrimination, political and social fights and by the creation of an endless number of cultural stereotypes according to which, for instance, Filipino Americans were “dogeaters”, Chinese American men were either emasculated or the “Yellow Peril”, and every woman of Japanese descent was a silent, obedient and sexually exotic “geisha”. Unable to disguise their slanted eyes and dark, straight hair, the Asian Americans have always been difficult to blend into the melting-pot: they are a “visible minority”, whose US-born children are constantly considered as “newcomers”, notwithstanding their perfect American accent that, even nowadays, has still the power to amaze the WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant). After many years of abuse, misconception and annihilation of their own identity, the Asian

American communities want now to be known, appreciated in their similarities and differences from the mainstream, perceived as an integral, contributory part of the American fabric. This proposition is openly stated in web sites such as the *Asian American Coalition of Chicago's* (founded in 1984), whose purpose is “strengthening Asian American community in the United States and recognizing Asian traditional and cultural values, while making its contributions to American democracy”<sup>1</sup>, and the *Coalition for Asian American Children and Families'* (founded in 1986), that works to “improve the well being of Asian American children in New York City”<sup>2</sup>. Since children are the most vulnerable part of any society and the foundations and hope for its future, the two coalitions are now devoting great energy to addressing the needs and the problems of Asian American children (almost considered as a “minority within the minority”) for whom it is more difficult than it is for the adults to negotiate a cultural identity, to feel comfortable with multiple roots. As a matter of fact, as it is pointed out in many articles of the seminal *Struggling to Be Heard, the Unmet Needs of Asian Pacific American Children* (1998), there are very few teachers (the first intermediaries between family and society) who have such a professional training, multicultural experience and deep understanding to be able to mediate and reconcile the American foreground with the different backgrounds where the children come from. Moreover, as far as

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. <http://www.asianamericancoalition.org>

<sup>2</sup> Cp. <http://www.cacf.org>



children's literature is concerned, it "has reinforced the perception of Asian Pacific Americans as foreigners, rather than fellow Americans",<sup>3</sup> as the Sansei Sandra Yamate remarked, since "children of Asian Pacific ancestry are still more likely to find books featuring anthropomorphic animals and creatures of fantasy than people who look like them and their families" (3). Published to celebrate the twelfth anniversary of *Chicago's Asian American Coalition, Children of Asian America* (1995), edited and published by Sandra Yamate who is also the author of some of the stories, stems from the need to bridge this gap in order to offer "a more balanced vision of the world"<sup>4</sup>. The present paper aims at analyzing this collection of fourteen stories.

The necessity to publish such a book is further explained in a letter that Sandra Yamate wrote to me some time ago:

I am a firm believer that American children of Asian ancestry need to be validated by seeing children who look like them, families that resemble theirs, and communities with which they can readily identify, since a significant proportion of Asian American parents are immigrants or refugees who, because they grew up in their home country, do not often realize that the books and stories common in their former country are much less relevant to their children. I also believe that other children need to read about Asian American children (and others),

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra Yamate, "Asian Pacific American Children's Literature: Expanding Perceptions about Who Americans Are", p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

especially if they are not likely to get to know many of them personally. With the rapid growth of technology and an increasingly global community, all children have an ever-growing need to have the opportunity to understand, respect, and appreciate differences.<sup>5</sup>

The volume is in fact dedicated to “Children everywhere” (5) and not only to Asian Americans. Each of the stories is focused on a child belonging to one of the communities that participate in the *Chicago coalition*. Their families have different traditions, different experiences, some of them emigrated voluntarily generations ago and barely remember their former motherlands, some others are recently arrived refugees, and for them it is even more difficult to cope with the new American environment and its values. Some are of Japanese descent, some of Filipino, others of Chinese origins and their individual path necessarily crosses the lines of the history of their people’s migration to the USA. The resulting many-sided picture scatters the “monolithic”, often superficial representation of Asian America given by mainstream culture (resembling the very idea of Said’s “Orient”); it also shows a much richer and multicolored portrait of the States, the same which is implied in the name “Polychrome Books” given by Yamate to her publishing house. Despite the differences, there are two features which create a bond between the stories and cast light on the “small world” of Asian

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<sup>5</sup> Personal correspondence, February, 2000.

American children: a) cultural heritage Vs. mainstream America, b) the school, seen as the primary environment for socialization and integration, once overcome the initial biases on the part of classmates and teachers.

a) Enrique Trueba, in his “foreword”<sup>6</sup> to the above mentioned *Struggling to Be Heard*, emphasized the often unresolved “dilemma” that many Asian American children have to face when they compare the “protected but secluded” environment of their house and the “cruel but appealing” world outside. They are forced by the circumstances to decide whether to emancipate themselves from their culture of origin (in order to better adjust to the American society) or to break the silence, cast away the image of colonized people and fight for equal opportunities and fair treatment, which seems to be a much harder path to follow for a child. The same “dilemma” is expressed by the Filipino American Marie Villanueva in the opening poem of the book entitled “Child of Asian America”, when she states that “Sometimes [she] think[s] [she] need[s] a disguise:/ But it takes a lot of bleach/ and a lot of perming solution/ and perhaps some different/ colored contact lenses/ to hide [her] identity” (10). Nonetheless, she ends her poem with a meaningful statement of freedom from the burden of prejudice, as she hopes that, someday, people will see “no longer a suspect foreigner,/ no longer a child of Asian America,/ but only this:/ just another child of America,/ just another American child” (11). In “Bowling to Tradition”, a Korean American story by John Lee and

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<sup>6</sup> Pang & Cheng., *Struggling to Be Heard*, P. xiv.

Lauren Lee, little Frank Jung refuses to wear the ceremonial costumes (which are metaphorically too tight and short) and does not want to pay homage to his parents. As a matter of fact, according to American parameters, bowing is not considered a traditional sign of respect and filial devotion as it is for the Korean community; on the other hand, it is associated with slavery and submission and, therefore, the child is afraid that his friends who are waiting for him outside the door, would laugh at him if they saw the scene through the window. Frank does not seem to fit anywhere: “he [is] part of the [family] group, but at the same time, he [is] outside of it” (57), he “[feels] everyone’s eyes on him, both inside and outside the house” (61) and he does not know how to behave, whom he has to please first. Unable to negotiate his own identity by solving the “dilemma”, Frank mechanically bows, but wearing a simple pair of jeans and a red sweatshirt; then he flies away, still torn between past and present, Korea and America, as we read in the final part of the story:

Looking over his shoulder, he saw his family gather together. They would eat duk guk, play games and tell stories. The warmth pulled him backward. He hesitated for a moment. Then Frank stepped out with his friends into the cold, winter’s afternoon sun (62).

The same embarrassment towards the cultural heritage of one’s parents is shown in “Mummy’s Sari”, an Indian American story by Ann Kalayl and Sandra Yamate. Young Meena can hardly tolerate her mother’s old-

fashioned way of wearing a traditional sari instead of western clothes, also because this habit clashes against her own ideal of woman represented by Ms Kopnick, the stylish “standard American” school teacher - “very pretty with golden hair, thick, dark eyelashes, and long, manicured fingernails” (41) – that Meena would like her mother to look like. Moved by her daughter’s desire not to be considered different, she eventually appears on “Parents night” in a blue pant outfit, without her usual soft, colored sari. Only in that precise moment, when she could actually mingle with the others without being so much noticed and pointed at as “exotic”, Meena understands that she prefers her mother in traditional Indian clothes, and that she does not really like that blue suit, meaningfully “scratchy against her face ”(44) when she hugs her mummy. Therefore, thus coming to terms with her own family’s difference from mainstream America, Meena asks her mother to wear one of her “beautiful saris” on that important night when she is introduced to all the other parents and teachers, including Ms. Kopnick. In this case the “dilemma” is solved and the main character understands the importance of preserving the ties with her cultural heritage, eventually seen as a fundamental part of her self and not as a handicap to disguise.

What is more interesting, however, is the aware, successful molding of a double, hybrid identity in which the tension between the roots and “the American way of life” is definitely solved. This process is shown in two other stories: “Who Am I?”, by the Thai American Duangporn Chiranand, and “Chocolate Chip Cookies”, by

the Bangladeshi American Tanzina Chowdhury. The first one is the story of Priscina, a little girl who learns pretty soon the differences between her family and the others due to her Thai origins. Nonetheless, when she eventually visits Thailand, she understands she does not completely fit also in that environment, where people giggle at her accent and she is considered “American”. Her “dilemma” is solved when she realizes that she is neither Thai nor American but paradoxically both!:

In Thailand people thought that she was American. In the United States, people understood she was different because they thought she was Thai. If she was not Thai and was not American, what was she? Who was she? It was so confusing. [...] Thai? American? American? Thai? Who...am...I? Thai... American...Thai... American... Thai American... Thai American! [...] Not just one or the other but both! (83).

A similar process is shown in the second story, where Amedea is able to overcome the prejudices (for instance, she is asked where she is from by a man who thought she was a tourist) and her feeling of not belonging, when she understands that she does not have to choose between being American or Bangladeshi. By observing some other people of ethnic origins, with their looks of foreigners (Italians, Chinese, Africans) but an accentless English like hers, she realizes that she can have a hybrid identity and be a Bangladeshi American girl. In the “small world” of a child, the chocolate chip cookie

with chips that melt and chips that don't and yet are part of it and make it tasty, becomes the new icon of America, thus replacing the "melting pot" where everybody had to blend into:

Ameeda began to eat her other cookie. She'd been wishing she was like one of the chips that had melted and been covered by the cookie dough, blending in so no one would see her. But as she enjoyed the last crumbs and loose chips, Ameeda realizes that maybe it wasn't so bad to be like one of the unmelted chips, distinct and obvious, yet still part of the cookie. After all, without the chips, chocolate chip cookies were not very appealing. Sort of like America without Bangladeshi Americans. Ameeda grinned. She wasn't about to let that happen. (18)

Besides the "melting pot", another foundation myth of America seen as a "land of opportunities" is dealt with - and modified in its deep meaning - in a Cambodian American story by Sandra Yamate, entitled "Opportunities". At the beginning, little Savath has to face discrimination from his schoolmates who call him names only because he does not look like them. He ironically reflects on America and its ideals when he says: "Some land of opportunity! Opportunity for what? Getting beat up by other kids, including the Asian kids today, who'd made fun of his dark skin and English accent?" (21). But then, at the end of the story, when he is eventually able to create a bond between himself and another child who shared his condition of "alienated minority" (though he

had contributed to one of his getting beat up), Savath says: “Maybe we have more in common than we thought. I guess we are starting to get to know each other. Maybe that’s why America is supposed to be a land of opportunity” (24). These new opportunities opened up by the USA are now linked with solidarity and communication between people, not only with the possibility of an economic enhancement.

b) As Sandra Yamate remarked after pointing out the lack or ineffectiveness of the existing school programs for Asian American children, “[with regard to] their problems of integration, unfortunately they are largely left to teachers”<sup>7</sup>. Most of the times, however, they are not trained or prepared to deal with worlds they do not know anything about, with cultures whose values and code of behaviour they ignore or misinterpret. To many teachers, Asian American children are invisible, often labeled as “model minorities” since they are highly respectful, do what they are told and speak very little, also because they are afraid of being teased by their classmates. Joel, the main protagonist of “Patintero”, a Filipino American story by Marie Villanueva, “[...] didn’t say much in school except to answer the teacher’s questions. He was so quiet that even the teacher sometimes forgot he was there” (31). Linguistic problems and the consequent embarrassment felt especially by first generation Asian American children are very seldom taken into account by the teachers. In the above mentioned story, Joel had been asked to read a paragraph from the textbook and “he had heard some of

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<sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence, February 2000.



his classmates giggling because he kept mispronouncing the word “feet” and said “pete” instead. The kids had laughed, and a few mimicked him, repeating “pete, pete” until Joel turned red. He never wanted to read aloud again. In fact, he never wanted to go back to school” (33). Sometimes, as it is possible to notice in the already quoted “Who am I?”, in which Priscina is called Kathy outside her house, Asian American children prefer changing their name when they are at school, rather than having it mispronounced, “mangled beyond recognition” (79). On the other hand, as MyLuong Tran pointed out in her essay entitled “Behind the Smiles, the True Heart of Southeast Asian American Children”, “before teachers get to know Southeast Asian students, it is recommended that they learn to pronounce their students’ names appropriately and avoid putting their students and themselves in an awkward situation”<sup>8</sup>. “Elyse Nakamura Can’t Speak Japanese”, a Japanese American story by Sandra Yamate, offers another instance of how a teacher can misinterpret the background of her Asian American student by assuming that, only for the fact that she “looks” Japanese, Elyse must necessarily know the language, own a kimono and be able to introduce her supposedly well known original culture to her classmates. Elyse feels ashamed because she is unable to accomplish the task set by her teacher: she is not bilingual, her very grandmother does not speak Japanese and does not own anything related to Japan because, as she explains to her granddaughter,

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<sup>8</sup> Cp. MiLuong Tran, “Behind the Smiles”, in *Struggling to Be Heard*, p. 49.

during World War II, Japanese immigrants had thrown away much of their Japanese belongings in the effort to prove that *they were Americans too*. Elyse learns that she is a “Japanese American” child and, at the end of the story, when the girl explains to her classmates that “there’s quite a difference between being a Japanese and being Japanese American” (55) and that for this very reason she cannot speak Japanese, the teacher meaningfully apologizes by saying: “You’re right, Elyse. I am sorry I didn’t know about Japanese Americans” (55).

In *Children of Asian America*, however, we also find an example of what a teacher should really be like, that is the person who is able to create a bridge, to establish a network of connections between the original customs and traditions (very important especially for the children of first generation immigrants) and the new American context, sometimes difficult to understand due to the lack of any interpretative parameters. Mai, the main character of “Mai’s strange day” by Hien-Lan Le, is a little girl just arrived from Saigon on Halloween day. Everything seems so strange to her eyes: the city is peopled with skeletons and monsters; at school, the teacher is a witch and the classmates are ghosts. The “invisible child” once again tries to disappear: “Mai sat silently in her chair. She could not and did not want to talk. If this was school in America, it was very strange and scary” (89). Fortunately, Ms Thanah, a Vietnamese American teacher, comes along and explains to Mai the meaning and the tradition of Halloween, an American children’s holiday. Once reassured by the vision of a familiar face, once understood what looked so strange

without an explanation, Mai feels encouraged to find a Vietnamese equivalent of the American holiday: Ted Trung Thu. She is happy again, ready to join the other children of the school for the “trick or treat” game, ready to be “one of them [in that] strange and wonderful night” (93).



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