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Making a Home of One's Own: The Young in Cross-Cultural Fiction

George Shannon

A story houses us. Often more utterly than does our flesh.

Richard Ronan, *Narratives from America*

When two lines or colors cross in art, a new image is created that is greater than its parts. But when two cultures cross, the nexus is most often a homeless land with its children feeling less than whole. As Liza explains in *Annie on My Mind* (1982),

Even when I was little, I'd often felt as if I didn't quite fit in with most of the people around me; I'd felt isolated in some way that I never understood. (105)

It is a homeless land because cross-cultural children are caught between two mirrors—two ways of seeing—each presenting a different image of the self. This clash, wrote Everett Stonequist in his classic study *The Marginal Man* (1937), “gives rise to a mental conflict as well as to a dual self-consciousness and identification” (145). It also gives rise to stories—stories about the conflict itself and about the creative act of storytelling—stories the child must hear *and* tell if the conflict is to be resolved.

Fiction based on the conflicts of cross-cultural children has been a staple of North American literature since the Anglo invasion began a history of acculturation and assimilation. The evolution of social perspective toward cross-cultural children, the changing characterization of such children in fiction, and the growth of minority literature itself all parallel the cross-cultural child's own search for identity. Stretching from the tragedy of no identity at all to the joy of self-definition, cross-cultural children may experience (1) rejection by both of their conflicting cultures;

(2) the acceptance of or by one culture while denying the other; (3) the attempt to be both conflicting cultures at once; and (4) the acknowledgement and acceptance of one's individual and evolving identity as a collage of cultures.

The dual importance of stories heard *and* told if the cross-cultural child is to reach the final stage is expressed in four novels for children, each told in the voice of a cross-cultural child: *Arilla Sun Down* (1976) by Virginia Hamilton; *Child of the Owl* (1977) and *Sea Glass* (1979) by Laurence Yep; and *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden. The significance of these narratives is not simply that they exemplify the self-defining process the cross-cultural child must go through, but that they also provide the experience of that very process for the writer and reader. As cross-cultural children hear stories of other searchers and experience the act of telling itself, they are more able to create their own stories—their own identities.

Arilla hears her own tales through her stream-of-consciousness memory and the stories connected to her father's treasured objects. Casey of *Child of the Owl* and Craig of *Sea Glass* hear tales from much older relatives of their fathers' cross-cultural struggles. Liza and Annie in *Annie on My Mind* read novels related to their own emotional search and later hear the joint autobiography of their two lesbian teachers. “Encyclopedias are no good,” Annie tells Liza as she hands her a copy of *Patience and Sarah* by Isabel Miller, originally titled *A Place for Us*. As she tells her own story, Liza says *Patience and Sarah*

helped us discuss the one part of ourselves we'd only talked around so far. . . . Gradually, I began to feel calmer inside, more complete and sure of myself and

knew from the way Annie looked as we talked, and from what she said, that she did also. (144)

First Stage: Dual Rejection

Conrad Richter's *The Light in the Forest* (1953), set in colonial North America, is a classic model of the first stage of the cross-cultural child's search for identity. The cultural conflict is the story and there is no resolution. Though Anglo, Johnny is culturally a Lenni Lenape Indian. Calling him True Son, the Lenape have raised him from childhood as one of their own. When he is forced to choose between his two opposing cultures during a war, he finds himself literally caught in a river between lands. Eventually rejected by both, True Son has no sense of Self—no identity or story of his own. He must accept the cultural categories set by others of his time. He can only lament, like the biracial child who speaks in Langston Hughes' poem "Cross":¹

I wonder where I'm gonna die
Being neither black nor white? (1970, 158)

It is only at the end of Richter's companion volume, *A Country of Strangers* (1966), that there is even hope for True Son. It is then that he is met by another outcast Anglo raised as an Indian and dually rejected. Perhaps, implies Richter, for the first time in their lives, they will be able to share an identity and make a home together.

As is true of most early fiction touching on cross-cultural characters, True Son's identity—such as it is—is created by those who judged him to be lesser than themselves. He is a dual outsider with his only apparent path to acceptance being the denial of half of himself. But which half?

Second Stage: Selective Rejection

Anne Nolan Clark's Santiago in her novel of that name (1955) finds himself tossed from one cultural identity to another. He is an Indian raised as a Spanish don and looked after by a North American businessman. Clark calls him a changeling and one of the lonely ones. Still, Santiago's sense of self is a step beyond True Son's, exemplifying the second stage of the cross-cultural child's search for identity. During his narrative journey, Santiago hears stories and experiences the various cultures of his childhood. In the end he feels able to choose one mirror over another:

What you are trying to tell me [Santiago tells his benefactor] is that I am choosing the way of an

Indian teacher instead of the North American businessman. But you forget something. I am Indian. My heritage has been that of the Indian burden-bearer and not that of a North American pioneer. The oxcart will be as new for me as the airplane is for you. (185)

Santiago epitomizes the return to ethnicity. He is like the Black artists of the 1920s who, after being raised in the conundrum of contemporary black/white America, began painting ancient tribal masks of Africa as an expression of their own identities. Ethnicity is vital, for one of the first steps in the cross-cultural child's personal journey is a recovering of the denied culture and its mythology.

But ethnicity can be limiting as well. Santiago's radical kindred spirit is Arilla's brother Sun who spends his adolescence forgetting his mother's Black heritage and being more Indian than his

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half-Indian father. These individuals cling to their selected identities as tightly as Narcissus and, in time, with similar results. With the exclusive acceptance of one culture, they must deny their other half, and the loss will come to haunt them. Santiago and Sun have chosen an identity, but their very need to choose is based on the outsider's need to categorize and separate. In the end they are not that different from those who just as exclusively select the opposing or majority culture and "pass." Either way, the "choice" leaves them feeling less than whole.

Because most cross-cultural children are surrounded by at least a family that shares their conflicting identities, "passing" is the one stage of cross-cultural sociology that has been rare in children's literature. Liza, however, of *Annie on My Mind* spends a good deal of her time passing and arguing with Annie about whether she should or not. Being homosexual, she is of a culture other than that of her family and of one they view as inferior. She cannot tell the ones who love her most about the one she loves. She accepts their cultural

¹"Cross" by Langston Hughes. Copyright 1926 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. and renewed 1954 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted from *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

rejection and “passes”—until the novel’s conclusion—so she won’t hurt them by her difference and risk personal rejection.

Third Stage: Attempted Dual Identities

Rather than being rejected by both or choosing one identity over the other, the cross-cultural child may attempt to be both at once. This duality is also historically the next stage of fiction dealing with cross-cultural characters. To those of the majority who have only one cultural mirror, the idea of having two is often quaint and exotic. However, for the cross-cultural child the life of the hyphen and duality is like living on a tight rope. For Craig of *Sea Glass* the frustrating world of the hyphen is forced upon him by the contradictory projections of those around him. His Anglo classmates think he is Chinese and treat him as a foreigner. The old Chinese think he is American and, in turn, also treat him like a foreigner. Speaking of those who accept the duality, Casey’s grandmother in *Child of the Owl* tells her, “In their heads, they all carry two pictures of what a family should be—an American and a Chinese one—and the two don’t always match; and that probably makes them the most miserable of all” (198).

Fourth Stage: Self-Created Inclusive Identity

In his study *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (1984), Richard Coe describes the cross-cultural life in autobiography as

the exotic-schizophrenic childhood—the narration of an experience of the past self, in which two incompatible cultural backgrounds clash so violently that the eventual writing of the autobiography becomes something of an exercise in psychotherapy, an attempt to rescue the adult self from the void to which contradictory, self-canceling forces had consigned it. (228)

Arilla, Casey, Craig, and Liza tell us their stories in order to replace the void of their childhood and emerging adolescence with a sense of home. Their stories illustrate the stage at which minority literatures begin—with narratives of troubled maturation. It is the stage at which the point of view changes from third to first person. These cross-cultural characters are no longer a “they” defined through the eyes of others but are—respectively—an “I” defined or created from within. Though he hasn’t the terminology, High-Papa, the child of a

slave and her white owner, in Robert Martin Screen’s autobiographical novel *With My Face to the Rising Sun* (1977) knows this stage is a vital psychological rite of passage. In advising his grandson Richard, who is struggling with his own biracial identity, High-Papa says,

Forget worryin’ about whether you light-skin or whether you dark-skin, an’ try to make somethin’ outa yourself *inside*. If you can’t do that, nothin’ else is goin’ to mean anything, I know. (45)

Like Jean Craighead George’s *Julie of the Wolves* (1972), *With My Face to the Rising Sun* is told in the third person, but by its conclusion Richard—like Julie—has grown beyond running from and between opposing cultures. He is ready to take charge of—take responsibility for—his identity and to stop seeing himself as a victim. He is ready to sort out and tell his own story as Arilla, Casey, Craig, and Liza do.

These four characters replace the despair expressed in Hughes’ “Cross” with the strength and energy of Arnold Adoff’s narrator in *All the Colors of the Race* (1982).*

When they asked
if
I was black or white
or what,
I said:
I was black and
white
and what
difference
did it make to them.
And they said:
did I have the answers
to the math
problems?
And
I had the Answers. (38)

A Personal Myth

The voice of Adoff’s narrator has grown beyond needing to justify her existence to others. She is, instead, answering the personal question of Joyce Carol Oates’ poet in *Unholy Loves* (1979) who wrote, “What is the story, the pattern, the myth I live?” (258). And her answer begins,

*“When they Asked” p. 38 and “I am Making a Circle for Myself” p. 13 from *All the Colors of the Race* by Arnold Adoff. Copyright © 1982 by Arnold Adoff. Reprinted by permission of Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Books (A Division of William Morrow and Company, Inc.)

forges a variety of contrary images into one unified expression" (Childs 1964, 62).

The Value of Telling Stories

All four characters have also come to value stories as the primary medium of expressing their collage identities. When Casey's errant father in *Child of the Owl* criticizes the family legend her Chinese grandmother tells, Casey argues back, "It's not just a story. . . . It tells me who I am. And that's worth more to me than penthouses and limousines" (203). Similarly, Craig savors the stories of Uncle Quail about other Chinese-Americans. And Liza and Annie read Plato's celebration of homosexual love in his *Symposium*, and *Patience and Sarah*, written as a lesbian's first-person narrative of love. James-Talking Story, who named her, and told her from his funeral bier "Remember who you are" (180), is one of Arilla's earliest and most sustaining memories along with Susanne Shy Woman who calls herself Enormity. "Telling stories," Arilla remembers her saying, "about all of us, so we will know one another, so we will come together as one. Pass it along" (92). As she concludes her narrative Arilla is more aware than ever of the creative power of telling stories. Thinking about recent events and the autobiography she must write for school Arilla tells herself,

Well, I could write Mom on a horse just like I could write her as a dancer, or even on skates. I could have a name for myself more than Sun Down. It'd be what I gave myself for what I do that's all my own. I sure will have to think about it. (248)

The ability of these characters to tell their stories is a freeing act and one of self-direction. They know inherently, as Charles Winquist states in *Homecoming: Interpretation, Transformation and Individuation* (1978), that the act of self-understanding

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and the ability to "tell a story is more important than the story which is told" (4). However, as literature, the stories told by Arilla, Casey, Craig, and Liza are successful, for they fulfill additional criteria and rise above other novels that are only lengthy debates.

The narrators express their own cycle of inner debate and the confusion of those around them but only as a part of the past that leads to their unified collage. This is why *Arilla Sun Down* is Arilla's biomythography and not her brother Sun's. He is able to explain that it doesn't matter what tribal memory their father carves into wood "so long as he's got one and he make it work for him" (105)—but he can't yet live it. Sun is not yet able to tell his own story because he is still afraid to look within. *Child of the Owl* and *Sea Glass* are, respectively, Casey and Craig's narratives rather than those of their fathers, who still see themselves through the eyes of others. *Annie on My Mind* is Liza's story because she is ready to tell it and not that of one of her classmates still peeking from the shadows.

Born between cultures, cross-cultural children become archetypal existential characters, for they must create themselves and establish their own meaning out of a confusing and antagonistic world. As these four novels show, that path to Self and meaning is the telling of one's own story. It is the truest birth, for it establishes a way of seeing. As such, Casey in *Child of the Owl* realizes that the cultural and emotional walls of Chinatown need not be confining:

I realized that it all depended on how I look around myself. . . . They could be like something to give me shape and form and when I couldn't grow anymore inside them, I could break out of those invisible walls. (92)

In fictional autobiography the narrator's voice is the writer's voice, if not specifically, most certainly in tone. It is because the creators of Arilla, Casey, Craig, and Liza are their characters' equals (and have set their novels in contemporary times) that they can write as "I" instead of "they." They have each grown through and beyond the stages of dual rejection, selected rejection, and attempted dual identities. They have each created an inclusive identity, a sense of community, and have begun to live without need of justification (Inada 1982, 256) which is reaffirmed as their characters establish the same for themselves in telling *their* stories.

The telling of their stories is ultimately the making of a home, for as Janet Varner Gunn discusses in *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (1982), the act of taking up one's life in language "testifies to the autobiographer's particular

involvement in the world, a landing rather than a hovering" (17).

In telling the story of the search for Self, the cross-cultural child fills the void into which he or she was born with something greater than its disparate parts. The child creates an inner circle—a breathing home—that is secure no matter the weather and as sustaining as Georges Spyridaki's in *Mort Lucide* (1964):

My house is diaphanous, but it is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapor. Its walls contract and expand as I desire. At times, I draw them close about me like protective armor. . . . But at others, I let the walls of my house blossom out in their own space, which is infinitely extensible. (51)

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