

Seeking Diasporic Pleasure: Reparative Reading Practices in Asian American Memoirs

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My original goal for this summer was to explore how Asian American authors address trauma and healing within self-writing and, with guidance from Professor Kong I planned to examine texts written by Asian Americans in the genres of memoir and autofiction, or the blending of autobiography and fiction.

To begin this exploration, I first read Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and Cathy Park Hong's essay memoir *Minor Feelings* (2020). Kingston's memoir is a seminal work in Asian American self-writing: moving away Kingston, I wanted to see how her descriptions of diasporic linkages and ruptures, intergenerational trauma, and reconstitutions of racial and communal identities extended into contemporary memoirs. Hong's essay memoir, which has become a highly influential text in modern Asian American studies, paired well with Kingston for Hong extends Kingston's models to the contemporary racial politics of Asian America. Within *Minor Feelings*, I noted discussions of Kingston's themes, but was particularly drawn to the motif of *intergenerational and communal healing*. *Minor Feelings*, then, became the foundational text for my study and served as a theoretical foundation upon which I began to develop my arguments.

From there, I began a general literary survey of a multitude of Asian American memoirs. Because of the variety of memoirs being published in contemporary Asian American literature markets, I decided to exclusively read non-fiction. I paired Michelle Zauner's *Crying in H Mart* (2021) and Nicole Chung's *All You Can Ever Know* (2018); these texts are both written by Korean American women contemplating relationships to the American Northwest, their mother(s), and their Korean heritage. I then read more self-writing from writers across the diaspora: Nishta J. Mehra's *Brown, White, Black* (2019), Stephanie Foo's *What My Bones Know* (2022), Maya Shanbhag Lang's *What We Carry* (2020), Esmé Weijun Wang's *The Collected Schizophrenias* (2019), and Phuc Tran's *Sigh, Gone* (2020). While our original plan to explore trauma and healing, reading these moving memoirs in conjunction exposed that I was far more interested in how authors were moving away from trauma and exploring novel methods of healing. Because of this, Professor Kong pointed me to theorists Eve Sedgwick (specifically, her article "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading") and bell hooks (*All About Love, Teaching to Transgress*). Additionally, to ground myself more in a psychiatric framework of trauma therapy, we read Bessel Van Der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014). After laying a critical groundwork, I completed my literary survey by reading EJ Koh's *The Magical Language of Others* (2020) and Victoria Chang's *Dear Memory* (2022).

My intent for this summer project was to develop the literary and critical foundation for an honors project in Bowdoin's English department. Thus, with Professor Kong's support, I narrowed my framework to engage explicitly with Sedgwick and hooks, and I began to examine these texts through a reparative reading framework and a love-based framework. Reparative reading is, at its core, the opposite of 'paranoid reading': it is to push back against overwhelming negative affects like shame, guilt, and anger, and seek pleasure and positivity within texts (and here, within author's own lives). Noting the reparative moments in each text allowed me to separate the memoirs and themes into three 'chapters': Alternative Healing Methods, Literature as Freedom, and Creating Communities of Care. To finish the summer, I composed a rough draft of my first chapter, Alternative Healing Methods. In this chapter, I paired *What My Bones Know* and *The Collected Schizophrenias* with the work of hooks, Sedgwick, and van der Kolk to explore how Foo and Wang are pushing back against paranoid practices of psychology and psychiatry. Both texts address the way psychiatric diagnoses have tendencies to be all-encompassing, where humanity becomes reduced to symptoms. While this draft is still under revision, my central argument is that a reparative self-reading and reparative methods of care (practices that allow for the authors to see their own humanity in full complexity) is an essential first step towards healing from trauma/trauma-based illness. From here, I plan to continue revising my first chapter and drafting two new chapters during the school year. I also plan to read more contemporary Asian American scholars (David Eng, Shinhee Han, Kim Jin-Ah, James Kyung-Jin Lee) to continue developing an appropriate theoretical framework under which to analyze these memoirs.

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