



GROWING UP BETWEEN CULTURES

A *Let's Talk About It* book discussion series developed by
Kathleen Ashley, University of Southern Maine

Alexandra Fuller, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood*

N. Scott Momaday, *The Names: A Memoir*

Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*

Elizabeth Nunez, *Anna In-Between*

Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*

Issues of cultural, ethnic or national identity – once considered relatively simple and unproblematic – move to the foreground in this reading series that includes memoirs, a novel, and essays. Each book provides a window into a historical period and specific geographical locations where different cultures intersect. Whether the setting is colonial and post-colonial Africa, the American Southwest in the 1940's and 1950's, post-World War II Poland, the intellectual scene of New York City, the class conscious Caribbean, or political Washington D.C., the complexity of cultural history in each case challenges the youthful protagonist who searches for a stable and coherent identity.

All of the central characters wrestle with questions about their own individual identity, questions complicated by their experiences growing up among multiple cultures. Who am I? What culture do I belong to? What country am I “at home” in? What language do I speak, and how do I communicate with people around me who speak another language or whose social codes differ from those I understand? How do others classify me? What bridge between my past and my future can I establish in the present? The story of the search for self-definition often includes the stories of parents, whose cultural assumptions and identifications may differ from those of the next generation and yet who have a powerful influence on their children. There may be multiple cultures within the family as well as in the outside society.

As a group, the readings ask us to examine such concepts as race, ethnicity, culture or nationality, and to challenge common definitions that may be based in political expedience rather than fact. Each author, however, chooses a different path for his or her journey toward awareness. Alexandra Fuller wrote several novels -- attempting to capture Africa's complexity – but in the end decided to write a memoir mainly from the naïve perspective of a child in the racist environment of colonial wars. By contrast, Elizabeth Nunez writes novels that draw heavily from her own childhood experiences in the Caribbean but her central character brings an Americanized professional viewpoint to the stratified island society. N. Scott Momaday and Eva Hoffman's memoirs narrate the reaction of sensitive artistic young people to geographical dislocations, whereas Eric Liu's interest in issues of Chinese cultural and ethnic identity only arose when he was a successful adult. He chose to explore those issues in politically-sophisticated essays into which his personal family stories are woven.

The books in this series thus highlight the cultural diversity in almost every setting and they reveal the many different ways there are to negotiate those competing claims of identity.

Alexandra Fuller, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*

“Bobo,” the child protagonist who unjudgmentally narrates her African upbringing in this memoir, allows Fuller to convey the sensations of a life at the edge of deprivation and death. Critics often comment on the vivid portrayal of African smells and sounds and the candid portrait of her mother’s mental illness. The naïve narrator also reflects the attitudes of her white settler parents who try repeatedly and unsuccessfully to farm in the midst of the wars of national liberation and then civil wars that dominated southern Africa in the last 40 years of the twentieth century.

European nations had divided up much of the African continent for their own economic and political purposes in the 1880’s. Fuller’s ancestors were among the British settlers who came to Kenya in East Africa, and her parents moved first to Southern Rhodesia (after 1980 Zimbabwe), then to Malawi, and finally to Zambia. In Rhodesia, Fuller’s parents join the fight to keep the country under the control of whites, a fight the settlers lose, and although they learn to keep their political views to themselves in subsequent moves, they retain their racist attitudes. As she grows into a teenager, Fuller begins to see Africans as more than the “Other” and to develop a social perspective that differs from that of her beloved parents. All of the family, however, considers themselves “African,” their identities firmly tied to the continent if not to any particular country within it.

In the southern African setting, identity-formation is complicated by the diversity of national and racial groups that Bobo grows up with. Her parents, for example, are British but have rejected their countries of origin to live in Africa. Although barely able to survive economically on their desolate farms, they have African servants whom they treat well while denigrating other Africans as “muntus” or “terrorists.” Besides the white population descended from the original British settlers, there are Afrikaners (white South Africans of Dutch extraction) and a variety of more recent expatriot nationalities. There are black Africans of many ethnic groups, each with its own language, there are “coloreds” or mulattos, and there are Indians who had been a commercial force in East Africa for a century. Bobo is confused; she is African, but not black. She is a “White-African.” She attends university in Canada and Scotland and marries an American, but her deepest affiliation remains to the “incongruous, lawless, joyful, violent, upside-down, illogical certainty of Africa” – which is her “home.”

N. Scott Momaday, *The Names*

Momaday’s memoir has often been received as a poetic evocation of his “Indian” heritage, as if that were possible to describe in simple, straightforward terms. An attentive reading reveals, however, that the memoir is an account of how both he and his parents creatively fashioned their identities from the multiple cultural and ethnic strands available to them in postwar America. To be a “Native American,” as Momaday shows us, is an “act of the imagination.”

Both the Prologue and the Epilogue of the memoir take us into mythic time through reference to the Kiowa myth of origins from a hollow log. The Kiowa get their name, “Kwuda” (the coming out people) from that legend, and the protagonist is ultimately able to touch “the fallen tree, the hollow log,” to name and be named by his Kiowa ancestors – actions in dream time that affirm his tribal identity.

But that identity is not the only one affirmed by the memoir. The genealogical chart that precedes the entire text visually establishes the fact that Momaday, whose Indian name is “Tsaoai-talee,” comes from two lines of ancestors. One is Kiowa, the other is Appalachian Scotch-Irish. Within the two lines of descent, also, the ethnic identities blur. His great-great -grandmother, Kau-au-oainty, was a Mexican enslaved by the Kiowa who

married into the tribe and brought her vitality to it. On the other side, there are stories of a Cherokee bride, Natachee, four generations back, after whom Momaday's mother was named. Most significantly, his mother who was a Kentucky southern belle began to see herself as Indian and to call herself "Little Moon." She chose to go west to study at an Indian school in Kansas, where she met Momaday's father Alfred. Natachee chose to move into the Indian world, Alfred went in to the opposite direction: "he moved out of the old world of the Kiowa."

Together, Momaday's parents made a life in the west, living in towns as well as on Navajo reservations, so that he early absorbed the sounds of both Kiowa and Navaho although his mother insisted on his mastering English as his "native" language. Momaday represents the fluidity of his cultural identities in a stream-of-consciousness passage of the narrative where, as a small child, he is imagining how he will shoot an "ugly Indian." He doesn't understand the "funny words" of his Kiowa relatives and at grade school he struggles (in another long "stream-of-consciousness" section) to define how he is Kiowa even as he participates in post-war American culture of nationalism, the movies, and sports. At the same time, stories of his Indian ancestors were being absorbed into his memory, and Momaday summarizes his themes by proposing that "Notions of the past and future are essentially notions of the present. In the same way an idea of one's ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self. About this time I was formulating an idea of myself."

The culminating experience for Momaday and his parents is their life in Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico, an older way of life combining the rituals of various cultures, Catholic as well as Indian. "There was at Jemez a climate of the mind in which we, my parents and I, realized ourselves, understood who we were, not perfectly, it may be, but well enough. It was not our native world, but we appropriated it, as it were, to ourselves; we invested much of our lives in it, and in the end it was the remembered place of our hopes, our dreams, and our deep love."

Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*

Hoffman writes a classic immigrant story of dislocation from one place to begin life anew elsewhere. When she is 13, her family leaves Poland to come to Canada, where a new language and way of life must be learned in order to survive. Eva (Ewa in Polish) gives her story a three-part structure: Paradise, Exile, and The New World. Cracow, Poland is "paradise" to the child, a place she remembers with nostalgia ("tesknota") that gives her "language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind...colors and the furrows of reality, my first loves." Most of all, it gives her music, for she becomes a pianist, an identity highly valued by the Polish. For Eva, music represents "perhaps the only ideal I'll ever really understand – the ideal of an equilibrium between effort and pleasure, between mind and passion, between receptivity and power."

The section of "exile" describes her first experiences of Canada and Canadians, and she feels a resulting alienation – stuck "betwixt and between" because "time is stuck within me...I can't throw a bridge between the present and the past, and therefore I can't make time move." She is "caught between two stories and two vocabularies." Her loss of her native language for her is a "loss of a living connection" between words and things. She cannot comprehend what she sees because she doesn't have language for it and that inarticulateness brings "enraging frustration." Nevertheless, she does learn to communicate, the family makes a transition with help from Canadian-Poles in Vancouver, and she continues her musical education with an inspiring Russian teacher. Finally, she goes to college in Texas.

Ironically, although the contrast between her idyllic Polish past and her colorless Canadian exile seems so stark to Eva, her parents were Polish Jews who had already been uprooted during the war, when every one of her mother's relatives died in the gas chamber. For the parents, Cracow was a place of transition to which they had no particular loyalty; they were eager to leave for a better life in Israel or Canada. They

had already led a life of difficult adjustment and survival, which continued when they arrived in Vancouver. They will remain in transition permanently, as Polish-Canadians.

Eva, however, is able to discover her identity as a writer in “the new world” of literary New York. Her “worldly knowledge and a public self to go with it...the most American thing about me” testify to her successful integration. The nuance and beautifully articulate style of the memoir testify that she has taken possession of her new language. At the same time, she is able to maintain her relationships with her family, the Polish community in New York, and even to return to Cracow to see old friends. What she has as an immigrant is an awareness of cultural relativity – that there is always another place out there. She remains the “observing consciousness,” and concludes that American mobility “makes assimilation almost an outmoded idea.” The last sentence of her memoir is “I am here now.”

Elizabeth Nunez, *Anna In-Between*

Although written as a novel, *Anna In-Between* draws on Nunez’s childhood experiences on the Caribbean island of Trinidad as well as her subsequent professional life in New York City. Unlike the previous memoirs discussed, the observing consciousness –the central character “Anna” – is an adult whose critical reactions to her parents’ health crisis and to the island society are those of someone already adjusted to another country with a different set of expectations. Anna is not the naïve child narrator for whom the primary family and first culture are the only ones she knows. Instead, she finds herself criticizing her parents’ near-colonial conduct with servants, their old-fashioned marriage, their social stereotyping, and their fear of America.

Through Anna’s response to their tense interactions during her visit to the island, Nunez portrays a world marked by its long and complex colonial history. Like many Caribbean islands, Trinidad was early settled by Amerindian tribes, then discovered by the Spanish, who tried to harness native labor for their plantations. It was taken over by the British in the eighteenth century and only given its own sovereignty in the late twentieth century. During this long period, African slaves were imported when the original populations proved desultory workers, and Indians and Chinese immigrated too. Anna’s parents Beatrice and John Sinclair, despite their English names, exhibit the features of this amalgam of “Amerindian, European and African blood.”

The society Anna observes also retains many of the class patterns of colonialism, including social stratification. Her parents face their medical issues with denial and stoicism – an upper middle class self-control. The ethnic and color distinctions remain. Indian immigrants are thought to be genetically more ambitious and hard-working, a claim Anna vigorously refutes. Beatrice retains her sentimental allegiance to another time, when “England trained its colonial subjects to serve the Mother Country,” and English royalty modeled proper conduct. Growing up with well-educated parents and a father with a powerful job, Anna had a difficult time knowing her identity because she did not fit easily into any of the social categories of the island. Her peers called her “Roast Breadfruit” – dark on the outside and white inside.

At the same time, the island’s attitudes and life style attract Anna, and from its vantage point she is able to see the racism in her New York world. There she is always defined as African-American, and because of that identity she has been given the task of finding books to publish that will appeal to a black readership. Although she is an editor at a major press, she sees that she has been ghettoized and her imprint, Equiano Books, has been stereotyped-- as if black readers have a different set of literary expectations from white readers. The novel ends when Anna meets her mother’s doctor, another islander who works in New York: “Two emigrants, two immigrants, neither one fully at home on the island of their birth, neither fully at home in America where they live.” Both are struggling with their identity as Caribbean-Americans, hoping that the hyphen is a “bridge,” but fearing that it is a gap they will fall through.

Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian*

At the opening of his hybrid text – both memoir and essays – Eric Liu meditates upon the mystery of his father’s life contained in a memorial book written in Chinese – which he cannot read. The gap between his father’s history and his own provokes Liu’s desire to explore issues of ethnicity and identity: “When Chao-hua Liu came to the United States in 1955, at the age of eighteen, he was Chinese. When he died thirty-six years later, he was, I’d say, something other than Chinese. And he had helped raise a son who was Chinese in perhaps only a nominal sense...Where does this Chineseness reside? In the word? In the deed? In what is learned – or what is already known? And how is it passed from one generation to the next?”

These are the questions that the second-generation ethnic American– like Liu, mostly severed from the parents’ original culture– tends to raise. Eric Liu refuses the obvious, however. He notes that, soon after their arrival from Taiwan to attend American universities, his father and mother had already begun their own transformation away from their Chinese roots. His father, for example, spoke English well, “as if he owned it.” Eric suggests that as the son of a well-integrated immigrant he himself had only completed the assimilation process, and he includes a tongue-in-cheek list of all the ways one could say he was “white.” But does that mean he is a “banana” (the epithet other Asians give to assimilated Chinese)?

Like other protagonists in this series, Liu describes his early childhood as a state of “amoebic bliss,” in which work and play, school and home, Western and Eastern cultures, blended happily. It was as an adolescent that he became conscious of ethnic differences and his potential inadequacies, an awareness that continued at the “grand WASP temple” of higher education, Yale.

In the essays that follow the memoir section, Liu explores what it means to be “Asian American,” and promotes the insight that assimilation means not just loss but also gain. He points out that thirty years ago there were no “Asian Americans.” This identity category was invented for the government census, but it was soon taken up by the various Asian immigrant groups. They realized that being “white” meant power; so too combining into one large “Asian” community or “confederation” – however artificial – would increase their political clout. In his thoughtful way, Liu challenges the current assumptions about what it means to be “Chinese,” and searches for new models of American ethnicity. Like other protagonists, Liu comes to the realization that “we are inventors, all. We assemble ourselves from fragments of stories. Every identity is a social construction, a drawing of arbitrary lines.” Liu wishes to be identified as an “ethnic libertarian,” and he imagines a world beyond multiculturalism, a “post ethnic America.”



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