

## SIGRID NUNEZ'S *A FEATHER ON THE BREATH OF GOD*: VISIONS OF THE ETHNIC SELF IN A CHINESE AMERICAN SHORT STORY CYCLE

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### (Resumen)

Este artículo analiza el "short story cycle" (ciclo de relatos) como un género literario particularmente apropiado para reflejar el drama de identidad étnica que viven los inmigrantes en Estados Unidos. A través de una discusión de las características específicas de esta forma híbrida, en donde los relatos independientes están interrelacionados para formar un conjunto, se comprende su adaptabilidad a los temas propios de la literatura de inmigrantes, en particular la búsqueda de una identidad. El análisis del ciclo de Sigrid Nunez titulado *A Feather on the Breath of God* demuestra claramente cómo esta forma literaria, con raíces en la tradición literaria norteamericana y manifestaciones concretas en la china-americana, sirve para presentar la situación de diáspora y la fragmentación experimentadas por muchos inmigrantes. La narradora de los cuatro relatos busca, en cada relato, un punto de partida para la creación de su peculiar identidad personal y étnica. Su tragedia será no hallar lo que necesita para su autoafirmación, el reconocimiento de su valor como persona, y su lugar dentro de la cultura de sus padres o la del país donde vive. El papel de la propia etnia, la importancia del lenguaje y las relaciones interpersonales son otros de los temas recurrentes que unen los diversos relatos y dan coherencia a este ciclo sobre el enigma de la etnicidad.

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The powerful images and themes that have emerged with the rise of ethnic literatures have led to a necessary reworking of traditional manners of viewing the immigrant and minority situation in the United States. Entrance into what had long been considered the territory of the "other" was made possible by the ever-expanding fiction of writers who have repeatedly meditated on the situation of the between-world artist and presented us with a search for personal and communal identity, through reflections on a homeland and the active responses to the immigrant's "new" world. The complicated process of selfhood and the inescapable doubleness of the between-world subject is the covert theme in much of this ethnic fiction, as the writers question what it is that determines both identity and community, signaling how geographical, ethnic, political and cultural makeup and differences serve as signifying aspects to this complex self. The recreation of this intricate self in fiction has, interestingly enough, brought about the development and expansion of a literary genre that has proven itself exceptionally suited to the task of articulating and elaborating distinctiveness. A survey of ethnic fiction in the United States demonstrates a proliferation of the short story cycle, a hybrid form that many of the principal ethnic writers have adapted and perfected as a tool through which they enact their dramas. This paper will explore the theory of the short story cycle as a vehicle for the development of Chinese American fiction in particular, and will analyze *A Feather on the Breath of God* (1995), the cycle of a recent Chinese American writer, Sigrid Nunez, in an attempt to show how the drama of ethnic identity executed by this writer finds its

fulfillment through a genre that is particularly fitting to the themes embodied.

The dynamics of the short story cycle make it a particularly appropriate form for the quest for the new definition of cultural pluralism that incorporates the immigrant legacies of Asian Americans, while adapting to the practices of the culture in which these works are created. Forrest Ingram, among the first critics to set forth a definition of a cycle, has determined it to be

... a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit... (so) that the reader's successive experience in various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts (15, 19).

The term "short story cycle" implies, above all, a principle of organization, a structural scheme for the working out of an idea, characters, or themes in which the constituent narratives are simultaneously independent and interdependent. A central aspect of the working of the short story cycle is the interaction between the individual stories and the overall effect of the patterning of the collection. The pivotal challenge of each cycle is twofold: the collection must, at one and the same time, assert the individuality and independence of each of the component parts while creating a necessary interdependence that emphasizes the wholeness and essential unity of the work. Ingram has further pointed out that consistency of theme and an evolution from one story to the next are among the classic requirements of the form, with recurrence and development as the integrated movements that effect final cohesion (20). Short story cycles magnify the relationships between the separate stories to create a larger whole, without destroying the specificities of each individual story.

This genre, though deprived of serious critical attention for a long time, has existed in as a basic Western narrative form since classical times, in collections unified by editor-authors: Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In the East, the Indian *Panchatantra* and the Arabian *A Thousand and One Nights* also reveal the principal characteristics of the short story cycle. In this sense, a cycle looks back to oral traditions of narrative while embodying signs of modernity. Cycles may be said to emulate the act of storytelling, the effort of a speaker to establish solidarity with an implied audience by recounting a series of tales linked by their content or by the conditions in which they are related. Interestingly enough, Chinese American literature has revealed a tradition similar to this Western phenomenon, the long folk tradition of song and story conventionally called "talk-story" (*gong gu tsai*) in immigrant circles, brought to popular attention by Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. This tradition, dating from the Sung dynasty storytellers in China and continually revitalized by Chinese arrivals in America, has been defined as "a conservative, communal folk art by and for the common people, performed in the various dialects of diverse ethnic enclaves and never intended for the ears of non-Chinese...it served to redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore (and) retained the structures of Chinese oral wisdom (parables, proverbs, formulaic description, heroic biography, casuistical dialogue) long after other old-country traditions had died" (Sledge 143). The fact that the original stories in both Western and Eastern traditions arose from folk imagination, from the collective effort of many people, gave each a separate identity, a uniqueness, and an independence which then

was subsumed and integrated into a whole, by a single author who modified and retold the stories to fit a particular design. Although it is obvious that the existence of short story cycles is a global phenomenon, still the pragmatic affinity for short stories that shaped the literature of the United States decisively in the nineteenth century seems to persist in the form of a national inclination in the present century for organized short story collections: perhaps the very determination to build a unified republic out of diverse states, regions, and population groups, helps to account for this continuing passion for cycles (Kennedy 1995: viii). As such, the short story cycle may be viewed as a formal manifestation of the pluralistic culture in which it is created and nourished.

The fundamental structure of a cycle emerges from the interaction of the diverse elements in the relatively independent components. Each short story has its own static and dynamic structures. At the same time, connective patterns on all levels draw these together into a totality strengthened by varying types of internal cohesion. In the first place, the title of a volume may indicate an organizing concept that acquires depth and resonance as the collection unfolds: titles that point to a particular locale or to a unifying element give immediate focus and direction to the process being unveiled. Other approaches to the necessary cohesion may involve, for instance, the process of development of a character, a composite type, or a set of characters; a dominant, explicit theme, such as a generation gap or search for identity; or the delineation of a particular locale or community. In general, more than one such pattern rivets story to story. Since short story cycles do not usually require the type of ending expected of a traditional novel, its typical concluding section or sections tend to simply round off the themes, symbolism, and whatever patterned action the cycle possesses. In this manner, through the drawing together in a final stories or series of stories the themes and motifs, symbols, or the characters and their communities which have been developing throughout, the author places the finishing touches on the portrait being created.

Nonetheless, as Ingram has emphasized, the most pervasive unifying pattern of short story cycles appears to be the dynamic pattern of recurrent development (17). This affects all the elements of the narrative: the themes, leitmotifs, settings, characters, and structures of the individual stories and, in consequence, the entire context of the collection as a unit. The repetition of a theme from different angles, for instance, and its ensuing growth in depth in the mind of the reader, may unify a cycle at the same time that it individualizes each story. For example, the separate stories in *A Feather on the Breath of God* reiterate the theme of immigrant isolation, and highlight the impossibility of any kind of real connection between the characters. This example also demonstrates the development typical of characters in short story cycles, as differentiated from the single continuous process one finds most often in novels. Character development in a cycle tends to follow a typically cyclic pattern: those characters who appear in more than one story of the cycle rarely occupy the center of the action in all the stories. While there are cycles unified by a single protagonist, many others contain a series of different protagonists or an evolving prototype. Nonetheless, at any given moment, the action of the cycle is centered in the action of the story which is at that moment being experienced (Ingram 22). Also, orchestration of time patterns acquire almost a secondary place in the structure. Frequently, the individual stories in a collection are organized independently of chronology; there is greater concern with the rhythmic pattern of the telling than in the chronological consistency of the events themselves.

The specificities of the form therefore work to make the short story cycle an especially pertinent vehicle for the distinctive characteristics of ethnic fiction in general.

The short story cycle itself is a hybrid, occupying an odd, indeterminate place within the field of narrative, resembling the novel in its totality, yet composed of distinct stories. Such a fusion of modes “imposes new strategies of reading in which the movement from one story to the next necessitates reorientation, just as the uneasy reciprocity between part and whole conditions the ongoing determination of meaning” (Kennedy 1988: 14~). Ethnic fiction has also obliged towards new strategies of reading and has caused a new awareness through a revisioning of the between-world circumstance. The short story cycle, which hovers between the novel and the short story, is thus a particularly apt medium with which to enact the enigma of ethnicity, the feeling that one falls “between two stools”. The ethnic short story cycle may be considered the formal materialization of the trope of doubleness as the between-world condition is presented via a form that itself vacillates between two genres. The fact that short story cycles exist in all the different ethnic literatures also signals the appropriateness of the form to portray a common experience. Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* are only a small sampling of the number and variety of ethnic short story cycles to be found. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* may be considered the most emblematic Chinese American short story cycle: it attempts to synthesize Asian heritage with American aspirations presenting a group portrait of four mother-daughter relationships that have to endure and bridge not only a generation gap but that created by the waning influence an older culture and the overwhelming presence of another. The cycle to be analyzed in this paper, in some way, looks to Tan's narrative and stem from her experimentation of the form.

Patricia Lin Blinde, speaking of Maxine Hong Kingston, has pointed out how the situation of the individual who must achieve the integration of heritage with the socio-cultural traditions of the adopted land finds its formal representation in the use of hybrid literary genres. As the barbarian melodies “translated well” when played on Chinese instruments, Kingston's work, and in particular her development of a very distinct mode, is the result of her incorporation of elements unique to her “exiled” experience as a Chinese American woman with the literary forms available to her (52). This is perhaps the wellspring of the need to appropriate a hybrid form, as the blending of genres may also reveal unique sensibilities to outside realities. Experimenting with genre combinations and discovering the utility of these is an intrinsic part of the writer's task, more so when the experience to be embodied is characterized by its continual crossing of boundaries. As such, to choose to write a short story cycle is indicative of the creative position these ethnic writers choose, one that is almost an optical illusion, being two things at the same time, and creating something totally new: a metaphor for their task of negotiating identity. In this regard, Elizabeth Ordoñez has pointed out that the “disruption of genre” is a common thread that links various ethnic texts: “the text itself becomes both the means and embodiment of modifying and reshaping female history, myths, and ultimately personal and collective identity” (19).

Moreover, the ethnic short story cycle, as a hybrid within a hybrid, ultimately offers diverse levels of reading and understanding, and may help further the ethnographic purposes of the writers. On the one hand, there is the patterned closure of the individual stories which principally enact personal dramas of identity and, on the other, the discovery of larger unifying strategies that transcends the gaps between the stories and serve to construct a larger sphere of action through the creation of communities. Asian American writers, who may be conscious of a double literary inheritance or, at least, the reality of an insider/outsider point of view, tend to contemplate how binary categories of cultural

classification have worked in the production of knowledge and counter-knowledge within the framework of literary and cultural studies, a position from where they redefine and construct alternative identities and communities. Hybridity, an important characteristic of all ethnic literary texts, can therefore be considered a strength rather than a weakness. It does not imply a denial of the traditions from which it springs, but rather focuses on a continual and mutual development. In this manner, the text itself becomes both the means and embodiment the histories, the mechanism for modifying and recreating personal and collective identity.

On different levels, ethnic short story cycles may project a desire to come to terms with a past that is both personal and collective: this type of fiction will explore the ethnic character and history of a community as a reflection of a personal odyssey of displacement, and search for self and community. The between-world writer's situation is the intense reworking of questions that ultimately refer to issues as oppositionality, marginality, boundaries, displacement, and authenticity: a process rather than a structure, requiring constant variation and review. This process is not different from that involved in the appreciation of a story cycle, in which the evolution and gradual unfolding of the themes, a discovery of a new kind of unity in disunity, integrate the essence of the form. Furthermore, insisting on a unitary identity can be a means of opposing and defending oneself from marginalization. Although there is no limit to the kinds of subjects or themes that are found in cycles, one repeatedly discovers that twentieth-century cycles are preoccupied with certain themes, including isolation, disintegration, indeterminacy, the role of the artist, and the maturation process (Mann 13-14). More specifically, one of the principal thematic constituents of the ethnic story cycle is the quest for identity, a common theme of ethnic fiction in general.

In the first place, the gradual revelation of character through apparently random glimpses serves to emphasize the idea of a personal and cultural identity as a collective self, shared by people with a common history and ancestry, and which provides a consistent frame of reference and meaning. Ethnic identity is, most often, "a matter of "becoming" as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past... identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall 227). As such, the act of amalgamation required for the understanding of the short story cycle is the same movement as that needed for the consolidation of the ethnic identity portrayed. Because cycles consist of discrete, self-sufficient stories, they are especially well suited to handle certain subjects, including the sense of isolation, fragmentation or indeterminacy that many twentieth-century ethnic writers and characters experience (Mann 9). The shifting borders of identity, and the isolated episodes that create it, find their formal expression in the stories that make up a cycle. Along with the sense of isolation, the lack of continuity (seen in the gaps that exist between stories in cycles) is used by some writers to explain the fragmentary nature of life. The ethnic self, forced to sift constantly through the assorted influences that mold it, ultimately seems to find completion and coherence in the totality, in uniting within itself the diversity it perceives in the world.

Elaine H. Kim asserts that,

...the most recurrent theme in our writing is what I call claiming America for Asian Americans. That does not mean disappearing like raindrops in the ocean of white America, fighting to become "normal", losing ourselves in the process. It means inventing a new identity, defining ourselves according to the truth instead of a

racial fantasy, so that we can be reconciled with one another in order to celebrate our marginality. It is this seeming paradox, the Asian American claim on America, that is the oppositional quality of our discourse (88).

As such, she appears to suggest that the need for a revalidation of the classic literary genres may be part of this "claim". Notably, the most emblematic Asian American works have challenged generic constraints, a phenomenon that Patricia Lin Blinde attributes to "the richness of bi-cultural life experience (which) cannot be contained within the limits of literary dictates" (53). The process of establishing Asian American identities from within, independently of imposed definitions, has reached a turning point clearly resonant with the phenomenological reality of the new Asian American. The experimentation with genre as a strategy of authorship manifests how these writers have "moved beyond the conventional dichotomous, binary construction of white and Asian-national to a positioning of ethnic identity as interrogative, shifting, unstable, and heuristic" (Lim 160). The story cycle to be analyzed in this paper fulfills the potential of the cycle form as a vehicle for the expression of the particular sensibility and experience of the Chinese American subject in diverse ways. This work may also be considered an expression of a new confidence demonstrated in a freer use of language and genres that stems from the Asian American's increased appreciation of cultural pluralism in American society and the awareness that they have a place in the canons. The unifying force in the cycles is a woman, who pulls together the diverse elements that make up the collection. *A Feather on the Breath of God* is told in first person by an unnamed narrator who is the unifying link between the very different and separate characters that appear in the narrative. Furthermore, the problems of race and adapting to the mainstream American life, as well as the consciousness of marginality and the inescapable desire to belong are recurrent themes in both narratives. The narrator of the cycle addresses the enigma of her ethnicity over and over again, and her conclusions - or the lack thereof - constitute an essential part of the development of the theme.

The affirmation of identity is the goal the narrator in Sigrid Nunez's cycle seeks. Though marketed as a novel, *A Feather on the Breath of God* is composed of four stories narrated by a single protagonist, the daughter of an enigmatic half-Chinese, half-Panamanian waiter and a stubborn German housewife. The collection explores the plight of four people whose lives are characterized principally by alienation and who struggle vainly to find a sense of direction and wholeness. The fragmentation reflected in the hybrid literary form the author has chosen is indicative of the individual lives of her characters. Though the characters are linked by their relationship with the protagonist-narrator, her narrative shows, above all, a failure to achieve a semblance of wholeness from the disparate pieces of her fractured life or through a fulfilling relationship with any of them. The telling of these people's lives seems to be an attempt to pull the diverse pieces of her life together, but these, like the stories in a cycle, remain irrevocably separate, connected only by the fragile thread of her being. She can neither fuse the fragments nor find contentment in any of the individual areas of her focalization. The use of the cycle here is particularly appropriate to show division, and the frustrated attempt at reconciliation.

In three of the stories, the protagonist narrates her reflections on persons who should or could have served as signifying aspects to the identity she seeks to uncover or construct. "Chang", "Christa" and "Immigrant Love" have the protagonist measuring herself against characters to whom she looks in the hope of finding a workable model with which to measure herself or draw clues on identity from. But neither her father nor her

mother are enough to give her focus; their own unhappiness and problems with adjustment only serve to confuse her. Vadim, her immigrant lover, floating as she is, hovering between worlds and identities, cannot give her the stability she yearns for. The penultimate section, "A Feather on the Breath of God", is autoreferential, in that it recounts her own attempts to find a place for herself: through an attempt at defining an American identity and through immersion in ballet, a world laden with its own cultural strategies. Though the individuals do not appear to forge meaningful bonds between them, the stories are nevertheless linked by themes that recur, such that each story is ultimately another exercise in definition of the issues that ultimately preoccupy the protagonist: ethnicity, the past, language, belonging. Although all the characters suffer the same problems, they cannot find solutions, nor know how to take comfort in the others. Their problems make them experience isolation keenly and their recognition of their separateness leads them to entrap themselves more firmly in the vicious circle of alienation.

Nunez's short story cycle is principally about diaspora and disassimilation: there are three actual immigrants, plus the narrator, who experiences the same dearth of a reference point. Chang and Christa both live in the past: he missing it in silent resignation, she imposing it on the present. The fracture in their home lies precisely in that they have no present nor future together. This absence of a truly shared present inhibits the couple from offering the semblance of an identity to their three daughters, who have to struggle to find one for themselves among the mysteries surrounding their father and the dominance of their mother. In the first story, the girls' discovery of their father's ethnicity, and the existence of an exotic past independent of them counts as one of their most dramatic childhood memories.

The first time I ever heard my father speak Chinese was at Coney Island. I don't remember how old I was then, but I must have been very young... My mother told the story often, as if she thought we'd forgotten. "You kids didn't know them and neither did I. They were friends of your father's, from Chinatown. You'd never heard Chinese before. You didn't know what was up. You stood there with your mouths hanging open - I had to laugh. "Why are they singing? Why is Daddy singing?" (3)

This discovery of a life that the father did not share with them causes the narrator to begin to ask herself questions about the quiet man who would not talk about his past. The first story in the cycle is therefore a meditation on her father, and the mysteries surrounding him. She is to uncover shards of the truth almost by accident: "In time I learned that he was born not in China but in Panama. No wonder I only half-believed he was Chinese. He was only half-Chinese" (4). Unasked and unanswered questions are to obsess her: "What was it like, his boyhood in Shanghai? How did the Chinese wife treat the second wife's son? How did the Chinese brothers treat him? When he went to school - did he go to school? - was he accepted by the other children as one of them? Is there a Chinese word for half-breed, and was he called that name as we would be?" (17). Part of the narrator's tragedy is that she is condemned never to really know her father, that she will never breach the wall of silence he erected around him in front of his family: "I don't believe my father was always the silent, withdrawn man I knew" (5). Until his death, and more so afterwards, she will be haunted by this sense of loss, and she will realize that this loss has deprived her of the opportunity to delve into an intrinsic part of her own constituent self. Not to know her father will leave a gaping hole in the knowledge she can have of herself, and this will result in bitterness.

But the torment of her father's silence is highlighted by her mother's attitude towards a past that she has willed never to disappear, to the point that it becomes a primary component of the present. The story entitled "Christa" is a foil to "Chang"; the positioning of these illustrates the principal polarities the narrator has to deal with and attempt to fuse. Her mother

...was always ready to reminisce - though that is a mild word for the purposive thing she did. The evocation of the past seemed more like a calling with her. The present was the projects, illiterate neighbors, a family more *incurred* than chosen, for there had been no choice. The past was where she lived and had her being. It was youth, and home... My mother never called it the Old Country. She said *my country*, or *Germany*, or *home*. Usually *home*. When she spoke of home, I gave her my full attention. I could hear over and over (I did hear over and over) stories about her life *before* - before she was a wife, before she was Mother, when she was just Christa (39-40).

Her relationship with her immigrant lover, focus of the last story, has at its center his recollections on his homeland, emphasized by her compulsion to learn about him by knowing his past. As a recent immigrant, his memories are very fresh, and the protagonist takes advantage of this to draw out of him what she could never learn from her father. She appears to believe that she can build him up in America from what he had been in the other country. But the violence and forbiddenness characteristic of Vadim's life alternately frightens and draws her to him: "The more Vadim tells me about his past, the less I want to hear. But how else can I understand him? I must know everything" (161).

The drama of diaspora is to also make each character specifically conscious of his or her ethnicity. There is a comprehension of how ethnicity is part each one's constituent being, and how this will mold or has molded one. Awareness of the ethnicity of the other also affects relationships, most often causing breaches. The narrator is bitterly aware of the her father's Chineseness, though she cannot understand it, the Germanness of her mother and Vadim's Russianness. The recognition of the vital importance of ethnicity to each of these characters only serves to make her crave for a group to belong to. This makes her more acutely aware of how each of the other characters deals with his ethnicity. For some reason, her father seems to deny his ethnic and cultural background at least in front of his family. This may be due to the narrator's supposition that he may not be too clear about it himself, having grown up in both Panama and China, and changed his name often. She wonders if it is from these transformations and dislocations that his mysterious attitude and his silence arise. "Chinese inscrutability. Chinese sufferance. Chinese reserve. Yes, I recognize my father in the clichés. But what about his Panamanian side? What are the Latins said to be? Hot-blooded, mercurial, soulful, macho, convivial, romantic, rash. No, he was none of these" (16). Each character's ethnicity perhaps leads him or her to have a secret life: the father is one way at home and another in Chinatown. That is an area tantalizingly glimpsed by the children. That part of her father's life is outside the reach of the narrator's knowledge and imagination and exist only through unanswered questions. And the narrator rebels, as she unconsciously demands him to come out of the self-imposed shell of his reserve. "I was angry at him too, for what he seemed to be doing: *willing* himself into stereotype inscrutable, self-effacing, funny little Chinaman" (22). The problems she created with reference to his ethnicity form a central part of her remembrance of him, and of the guilt she feels at having lost the opportunity to get to know him and learn from him. She



also reflects on how he must have lived his life, alienated from his homeland, in a family he cannot relate to and who will not relate to him:

We must have seemed as alien to him as he seemed to us. To him we must have always been "others." Females. Demons. No different from other demons who could not tell one Asian from another, who thought Chinese food meant chop suey and Chinese customs a matter for joking. I would have to live a lot longer and he would have to die before the full horror of this would sink in. And then it would sink in deeply, agonizingly, like an arrow that has found its mark (23).

Her mother, on the other hand, celebrates her ethnicity, and draws from it a feeling of superiority over everyone, particularly her husband. "My mother thought of the house as hers... The daughters were hers too... It was part of her abiding nostalgia that she wanted to raise her children as Germans. She sewed dirmdls for them and even for their dolls. She braided their hair, then wound the braids tightly around their ears, like hair earmuffs, in the German style. They would open their presents on Christmas Eve rather than on Christmas morning. They would not celebrate Thanksgiving. Of course they would not celebrate any Chinese holiday. No dragons and firecrackers on Chinese New Year's. For Christmas there was red cabbage and sauerbraten. Imagine my father saying *.sauerbraten*" (15). Just as her father's withdrawal raises questions about her own ethnicity, her mother's enthusiasm also raises questions, and a barrier difficult to overcome. "Fear of impurities, love of obedience, preference of animals to men. Like my father, my mother also seemed at times bent on conforming to stereotype. She got a dog, a Doberman pinscher, and she named him Woden" (90). Christa, too, appears to have a secret life: her mysterious visitor; her nostalgia for Rudolph, the man she could have married. Just as the narrator cannot reach her father because she does not know him, she cannot reach her mother either, because of the wealth of information she has received about Germany only makes her realize that her mother is inexorably beyond her. "She was different. She did not belong. "How in God's name did I get here?" she would ask, her head in her hands, truly bewildered; as if she had blown here like a feather" (72). And the narrator comprehends that her mother's bitter loss of her native land will always hang between them, as an unsurmountable abyss she will never be able to bridge. And she also sees that this relationship is, in a manner, Christa's defining quality.

It was not to be hoped that any American - let alone an American child could grasp what this unique quality of being German was all about. I don't recall how old I was, but at some point I had to wonder: If you took that quality away from her, what would have replaced it? What sort of person might she have been? But her Germanness and her longing for Germany - her *Heimweh* - were so much a part of her she cannot be thought of without them. To try to imagine her born of other blood, on other soil, is to lose her completely: There is no Christa there. (59)

And her parents' ethnicity will irrevocably separate them from their children, who will be neither Chinese nor German. A painful childhood memory is of their father playing happily with a couple of Chinese children at a barbecue. "He never played like that with us." A revelation and a shock, that glimpse of a happy, active father. Our mother didn't see anything shocking about it. 'Ach, such adorable little Chinese kids what do you expect? You have to forgive him. I would probably be the same with little German children.' Some

things it would be death to forgive" (180). The girls, in particular the sensitive narrator, will have to come to terms, on their own, with the betweenness imposed by their fate.

Vadim also has a life she does not and cannot share: his past life, "In Odessa, I was as an animal" (140), filled with brutality and absurdity, and the family who immigrated with him to America. His immigration to the United States came almost against his will, overruled as he was by his family. He is "fiercely proud of his Russian blood" (130), and dreams of returning home. In Brooklyn, his community is Russian and he lives as though he had never left Odessa. The protagonist cannot understand why he will not leave the apartment he shares with his entire extended family, but must accept that as his choice. She will never really know Vadim, alienated as she is from his real existence, and their relationship is doomed from the beginning.

The theme and tragedy of diaspora and disassimilation is to extend to the narrator's life. The three individual narratives exist independently - as stories and as persons who cannot achieve any real relationships with each other. They can neither interconnect, nor fuse to offer her a coherent model for her own ethnicity. Her forced detachment from the three protagonists of the other stories obliges her to write one in which she will attempt to define herself, independently of those who have only added confusion to her search. The story "A Feather on the Breath of God" attempts to link the other three, as in it the protagonist draws together the strands she has woven and tries to delineate an identity for herself. This story is about continuity and contradiction, about building with the tools - often misunderstood - that one has been given by fate, or by ethnicity. The narrator's attitude is one of ambivalence because of her legacy. Is one a character to be invented, as she says of her father? Her quest, and the answers she tentatively arrive at, will manifest themselves in two ways. In the first place, in the articulation of her own American identity, independent of her parents' ethnicity, yet inseparable from their influence. She is conscious that she does not share with either of her parents the identification with place that gives them the roots she lacks, and her between-worldness is converted into a cause for grief. She hovers between a desperate desire for stability and the compulsion to uproot: "What is a home? In the ten years after I left my parents' house I lived at fourteen different addresses.... The trouble I have travelling goes beyond the shyness and vulnerability felt by most people when taken out of their familiar world. What I feel is something closer to bereavement" (88-89). The legacy endowed to her by her parents' immigration, to be or become American, will further separate her from them: "Surely many times in his life (my father) must have wished his wife were all Chinese. My mother wished that her children were all German. I wanted to be an all-American girl with a name like Sue Brown" (17). In this regard, it is interesting to note that the narrator is never actually named. The only reference made to this is the observation that her mother gave each of her daughters "a Nordic name" (15), which, united with her father's Chinese last name may be symbolic of the creation of the American.

The task of forging an American identity from the conflicting messages received at home and outside may also have been a source of confusion and instability for the narrator: "When I talked about my mother and father people often said things like, "Only in America." People called their story "a real American story" (87). Her parents both attempt to move out of their ethnicity to forge a family, yet remain attached to what they are. The daughters are given the charge to move independently, without any real help from either of their parents. One of her early memories, "of another teacher, on her knees, hugging me and pleading, "Promise me you'll never forget that you're just as good as any other little American" (87), only foster her insecurity and sense of inadequacy. Her relationship with

Vadim opens for her an unexpected dimension to her own belonging. "I am the only native American he knows. "You *are* my America," he says. *Someone's America - me!*" (147). Yet she knows she will never really sever the ethnic ties her parents have, deliberately of not, forged for her. "Genes. Blood. Soil. Why should I feel a deeper pain on hearing that the Black Forest is dying than on hearing about the dying forests of the Adirondacks? And what is this surge of feeling inspired by a photograph in a magazine: a group of smiling Asian-American children: *Those Asian Whiz Kids! Pride?*"(86). Her own Americanness will never be separated from her parents' background, and she is to experience a communion with her parents' roots and with how these have molded her

Twenty years passed between my own first and second visits to Germany. The second trip took place soon after I graduated from college. By that time already it had become a fad: digging up one's roots, travelling to the land of one's parents, describing how it felt to set foot for the first time on the soil trod by generations of forebearers. That tingling of the blood, sense of homecoming, and always, and perhaps most important, pride. Imagine feeling that way about Germany... The last thing I would have believed back then was that one day it would be fashionable to be Chinese; or that I had only to wait a few years, till I reached adolescence, to hear people say that they envied me my exotic background. (84-86)

In the second place, the narrator embarks on a parallel search for a culture for herself, one that is somehow beyond ethnicity, beyond the cultural demands or mysteries of those close to her. This she discovers in ballet. In this manner, she finds a place to belong that she chooses for herself, in which she is judged by her own worth, and not by fate, or genes. Ballet creates for her a world with its own rules for living, its own *weltanschauung*. In this manner, unknown to herself, she too builds a secret life: the fantasy of the ballet. This story, which deals with themes that do not appear in the others, is, in this sense, autonomous and also stresses her search for independence in relation to the others. Everything about the world of ballet responds to the young girl looking to escape a life she cannot comprehend, and to feel a sense of belonging. "Ballet meant finally being taken seriously; meant being allowed to take yourself seriously. It gave me back the dignity that I felt was constantly being undermined elsewhere in my life... I had discovered the miraculous possibility that art holds out to us: to be a part of the world and to be removed from the world at the same time" (99, 101). For the narrator as a girl, ballet is the escape from her life in the projects and the questions about herself she cannot answer: "But once at the barre, with the first plié, everything fell into place. For the next hour and a half I would know who I was and what I was doing and why, and that was not at all the way I felt most of the time. I would be fully present, as I rarely was outside of class. It was a new and empowering feeling... As a dancer, for a brief time it was possible for me to believe that the world was a simple place, bare and clear as geometry. Balance, symmetry, motion, shape. Purity of heart. Will. *Work as hard as you can. Make it beautiful*" (100, 116).

Though analogous themes are presented, the stories' independence is highlighted. Nunez presents three meditations on ethnicity as separate stories to emphasize also the separatedness of those divided by ethnicity, though they may belong to the same family. Consequently, the vital role language plays, as well as the resulting communication, or lack thereof, that results, is intricately linked to the enigma of ethnicity. The narrator is painfully conscious of the role of language in establishing place, in creating a space within which one can belong or where one will be condemned never to belong. The four stories offer parallel

versions of the drama of language for the protagonist. Her ignorance of her father's first language, she is aware, is one of the reasons for the breach between them: "Although we shared the same house for eighteen years, we had little else in common. We had no culture in common. It is only a slight exaggeration to say we had no language in common" (4). This will separate them until his death, and continue to keep him a mystery in her mind and heart. "I would hear him speak Chinese again, but very seldom. In Chinese restaurants, occasionally on the telephone, once or twice in his sleep, and in the hospital when he was dying. So it was true, then. He really was Chinese. Up until that day I had not quite believed it" (4). Christa, inexplicably, also did nothing to make her children learn German, proud as she was of the fact that she herself spoke better English than the other women in the projects. Her knowledge of English also served as another barrier between her and her husband, who never really learned. Her logic with respect to the children's learning German appeared reasonable. "It's not your language, you don't need it, learn your own language first" (35). But her attitude ultimately left the children with another loss: "My mother said, 'English is a fine language, it gets you to most places that you want to go. But German is - deeper, I think. A better language for poetry. A more romantic language, better for describing yearning'" (36). She faults both her parents for denying her the gift of their language: "To think that neither my father nor my mother ever showed any desire to teach me his or her language. A terrible withholding, that now seems to me" (146).

It is ironic, then, that she will meet Vadim when she teaches him English. "Broken English: Sometimes I think it is my fate" (129), she claims. But, as all her relationships have developed in spite of a lack of English, with Vadim the same will happen. Through this relationship, she will perceive an intricate connection between language and belonging, with love, and with being able to express and understand that love, a recurrent theme of the other stories. Of her father, she muses that "...in all those years, (he) never learned enough English to tell me how he felt about me" (147). It is ultimately language that separated her from both her parents, and it will be language that will bring her close to Vadim: the language she teaches him, and her desire to speak in his mother tongue. "Vadim also wishes I spoke Russian. He has dreams in which I appear speaking it fluently, as I used to appear in my own dreams speaking German...the closer I become to him the stronger my desire to speak to him in his own language, and to have him be the one to teach it to me" (145-146). It is language that brings them together, just as it was language that separated her from her parents. To the narrator, love and language will always be inexorably fused: "I am shocked when I meet a man who says he is about to marry an Italian woman but has no intention of learning Italian. What kind of love is that?" (164). Only through language, and one's own language, she implies, can one love properly and fully.

Ultimately, the cycle is about mistakes, and regret over wrong choices recur in the stories, emphasizing divisions and denying forever the possibility of unity. Though each character is painfully aware of his self-chosen error, he or she is powerless to change the course of destiny set in motion. The narrator's parents are convinced they are wrong for each other, but continue to live under the same roof; her lover and his wife are mismatched, yet he is incapable of leaving her; the narrator knows too well that her decision to be alone promises loneliness, but she cannot break her own patterns of love with unsuitable men. The losses are measured in missed possibilities, in all the ways that life might have been. This leads to an overwhelming sense of failure in all the characters and constant references to what may have been. Christa bemoans not having married Rudolph, the narrator thinks that if she had been born a boy, her father might have built a relationship with her: "Perhaps with a son he would have been more open. Perhaps a son he would have taught Chinese"

(10). The spaces between the stories in the collection are the gaps between the characters and the frustration over not being able to fill them. Though the narrator turns once again to art - to writing in this case - to try and find a semblance of coherence in mysteries and pain surrounding her childhood and growing up, she does not arrive at reconciliation. The short story cycle, albeit united by its themes, ultimately does not help the protagonist forge the identity she yearns for, and her destiny to continue trying to bind together the fractured pieces of her life.

This short story cycle, as a discourse on Asian American self-definition, demonstrates the strong collective impulse that has characterized much of minority fiction. Using the paradigms of storytelling to embody the drama of immigration and adaptation, Sigrid Nunez weaves together the sources of meaning to try to affirm the identity of the ethnic individual. The questions about self-representation are answered through narratives that articulate stories of survivors in a world full of questions and doubts. The writer turns to roots - family and ethnicity - as sources of personal identity and creative expression. The manner in which she, as with other ethnic writers, has appropriated the short story cycle as a metaphor for the fragmentation and multiplicity of ethnic lives is itself an articulation of the between-culture position and the complex process towards self-identification. As such, the multiple impressionistic perspectives and fragmentation of simple linear history emphasize the subjectivity of experience and understanding. The subsequent narrative, a reflection of a tendency towards a hybrid form, provides enriching glimpses of societies in the process of transformation and growth.

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