Ripping Laohu: Hyphenated identity in Phillip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* and Ken Liu’s *Paper Menagerie*

In Philip Roth’s novel, *The Plot Against America*, and Ken Liu’s short story, *Paper Menagerie,* we are presented with two different cases of hyphenated identity. Looking to the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, we can find a working definition for hyphenated identity:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with **a veil**, and gifted with **second-sight** in this American world, –a world which yields him **no true self-consciousness**, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this **double-consciousness**, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, –an American, a Negro; **two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body**, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (TSOBF 214-215).

Du Bois is stating that there is in fact no true consciousness, and that the minority can see the dominant society more consistently, especially the contradictions in actions versus ideals. I believe that this is especially prominent amongst children of color, like the two protagonists Philip and Jack, who both struggle to accept their hyphenated identities in different ways, with generational differences and ideas of assimilation playing a significant role. In Roth’s novel, the main character, Philip, struggles with being Jewish in an ever-growing fascist American society, while the main character in Liu’s short story, Jack, struggles with being Asian-American, half Chinese and half White, in Connecticut. The two boys are products of their surroundings, the culturally confusing Americanism that comes with the idea of the Melting Pot. Both boys, in their early childhoods, are unaware of their differences in the greater picture of ideal “Americanism” in society until they become forcibly awakened to the fact that they have a cultural and or racial “otherness.” Philip struggles to understand the motivations of his older brother Sandy, respects his father’s opinions and outrage toward the circumstances they face, but also finds it hard to understand why Jews are being persecuted, and instead of facing these issues he chooses to imagine what it would be like if he weren’t Jewish. On the other hand, Jack struggles with understanding his mother’s motivations as a mail-order bride, his identity as a mixed-race child, and his misplaced anger toward his mother and half of himself. Assimilation into mainstream America is presented as a goal, but it is a threat toward the cultures of all minority groups. Americanism is a form of assimilation that is disguised as tolerance and acceptance for one’s differences, but it is actually a type of cancelation through shaming and active prejudice.

In Liu’s *PM,* Jack overhears the conversation of two nosey neighbors that have come to welcome and or spy and pass judgement on their new neighbors. He hears one woman say, “Something about the mixing never seems right. The child looks unfinished. Slanty eyes, white face. A little monster (67),” and eventually an interaction with a classmate named Mark pushes him to the point of becoming conscious of his identity, the identity that is created for him in association or contrast to Americanness. This identity is painted as lesser than, shameful, and cheap. Being mixed race becomes a burden and Jack decides to distance himself from his mother and her culture because he has been told that she is cheap, that the origami she makes him is trash, and the literal ripping of his origami tiger, Laohu, signifies the figurative ripping apart of his consciousness. He can’t seem to identify as both Asian and American because one is portrayed as greater than the other, and therefore it means to cancel out the lesser.

This canceling is what happens when one tries to assimilate. Assimilation should be about interweaving one’s cultural identity with their societal identity, but in reality, it is a choice, the choice of cancelling out part of who you are in order to be accepted, or give you the feeling of acceptance in the greater society, that being white America. Liu’s short story presents an entirely negative view of assimilation, and I believe that he uses magical realism to heighten the imagined cultural differences between Americanism and the East Asian “other” to have more for his main character Jack to push back against. He is not only pushing back against his parents, particularly his mother, but also anything and everything associated with his Chinese heritage, and his mother’s practical magic is meant to focus and symbolically blanket over these associations. His mother’s culture, in association with the living origami animals, becomes reduced to “stupid cheap Chinese garbage (68),” before his very eyes in comparison to the expensive and ironically cheaply made Obi-Wan action figure that represents American consumerism. His mother’s body is also reduced to its association with American consumerism, causing Jack to feel insignificant, and associate everything having to do with his mother as insignificant.

How can one accept their hyphenated identity if it is reduced in such a way? If we can understand how assimilation causes Jack to associated his Chinese heritage with insignificance in comparison to his white heritage, then we can see that it is not completely his fault for being portrayed so harshly. His backlash toward his mother is caused by his learning, through shaming and de-culturation, that his Chinese heritage is garbage compared to his white heritage, and that whiteness is more associated with Americanness than any other race or ethnicity. This causes him to deny his ethnic culture. For years, he refuses to even speak Chinese because he sees it as lesser compared to speaking English, he deflates and hides his paper menagerie away because he wants nothing to do with his mother’s culture, and he forces himself to eat ‘American’ food and play with ‘American toys’ for the rest of his childhood and then these habits bleed into his adulthood. His de-acculturation, desire for absolute integration into American culture, causes there to be a rift in his identity. He simply cannot accept or achieve a hyphenated identity because he has been taught and forced to have only negative associations with his Asian Ethnicity while identifying as American.

In Roth’s novel, the alternate history that occurs once FDR is not reelected as President, but is instead succeed by the white supremacist Charles A. Lindbergh, results in the negative and racial persecution of Jews in a growing fascist American society. The protagonist, Philip Roth, a seven-year-old Jewish boy living in Newark struggles with his hyphenated identity because there are a few different groups that are painting Jewish American’s in very different ways. There are the fascists associated with the newly elected president, and the Jews who conspire with the presidency, or the Office of American Absorption (OAA), like the Rabbi Bengelsdorf, and the everyday Jewish American, like Philip’s father Herman Roth, who just wants equal opportunity to achieve the American Dream. Young Philip has too many examples of what being Jewish means, what being American means, and what being Jewish American means, all in varying degrees of positive and negative influence. He struggles to understand and achieve a hyphenated identity because the entire nation seems to be struggling as well. One of the positive associations that Philip has with national identity comes from his stamp collection. They seem to represent inclusion and tolerance, and portray the progress that can occur in American society. He points out that there are women on stamps, and African-American's on stamps; Philip is enamored with them, and at one point he wonders if there will ever be a Jew on a stamp. For Philip, the stamps represent an inclusive America, and once that inclusiveness is threatened by the growing fascism in their society, Philip becomes afraid and loses this positive association with hyphenated identity. Philip is confused, and understandably so. He admires his cousin Alvin, but Alvin is opposed to the new president and wants to fight against fascism in Germany. Philip also admires his father, who opposes Lindbergh, but believes wholeheartedly in democracy and does not actively fight against the ensuing anti-Semitism and fascism, only expecting people to do the right thing and becoming angry when others give into their prejudices and or side with the presidency under an illusion of equality. Herman hated people like Rabbi Bengelsdorf, and he and Bess criticize Aunt Evelyn "for having become another of the small band of misguided Jews to serve as underlings to those now in power (184)," and others like are the type of people that Herman believes are betraying their own people. Philip loves his father, but he also loves his Aunt, and these conflicting ideologies cause Philip to completely disassociate his being Jewish from his Americanism.

In the novel, groups like the OAA present assimilation into mainstream America as a goal to work towards, but it is a threat to the minority group culture. Philip admires his brother Sandy, who is a talented painter, but also gets sucked into the OAA by Aunt Evelyn. He is an avid supporter of Lindbergh, and has been ever since he lived and worked on a farm for the summer, getting a taste of the real "American" experience, and begins to disassociate himself from men like his father.

"It went without saying that Mr. Mawhinney was a Christian, a long-standing member of the great overpowering majority that fought the revolution and founded the nation and conquered the wilderness and subjugated the Indian and enslave the Negro and emancipated the Negro and segregated the Negro, one of the good, clean, hard-working Christian millions who settled the frontier, tilled the farms, built the cities, governed the states, sat in Congress... One of those unassailable Nordic and Anglo Saxon protestants who ran America and would always run it...while my father, of course, was only a Jew (93-94)."

The "Just Folks" program is a form of de-culturation, and is a prime example of how assimilation is a threat to the minority group culture. Philip attempts to understand why his brother associates himself with this group, and why he looks down on their father. He even making excuses for him when Alvin claims that Sandy is just an Opportunist. "Your brother's nothing... he's less than nothing... Sandy's a fucking opportunist. So is your bitch aunt with the big pointy tits. So is the great rabbi. Aunt Bess and Uncle Herman are honest people, but Sandy selling out to those bastards right off the bat? At his age? With his talent? A real fucking doozy, this brother of yours (182-183)." It is easy to see why Philip struggles with achieving a hyphenated identity when we step back and think about all of the conflicting ideas held by the people who are the most influential in his life. Philip tries to defend Sandy, but Alvin has a point. Why would Sandy turn against his own father, his own people, if not for a better opportunity in the greater picture of society. Philip thinks "if only Sandy *had* told me he was leading a double existence! If only he was making the best of a terrible situation and masquerading as a Lindbergh loyalist to protect us! (183)" He wants so much to believe that his brother is a good person, and that he is in fact protecting the family by turning his back on them, but Sandy is just another one of the misguided Jews that have given into those in power. The OAA is another way that those in power have turned people against each other so that they remain oppressed and ultimately destroy each other.

Philip Roth becomes so disassociated that he begins following strangers with his friend Earl Axmen. It was like a game to them, or a way to pass the time. They follow men that they believe to be Christians on their way home from work, and they “never followed anyone we thought was Jewish (116).” I believe they did this as a form of escape, and to understand if these men were truly that different from them. Why were Christian’s above Jews? Perhaps the children were trying to understand the cause of racism in their own childish ways. Philip becomes a liar and a thief, stealing bus money from his mother’s purse to use for his adventures with Earl. His downward spiral can only be a result of the confusion and anxiety all around him. He is afraid for his parents, and for himself in the growing anti-Semitic society, and following these strangers is another way for him to escape, to pretend that he has no family so that his pain will be lessened. One can only imagine the long term psychological effects that the current societal climate would have on a child so young. The novel’s changing societal climate in the novel presents one of the clear struggles of its main characters to achieve a hyphenated identity.

Jack and Philip both struggle with achieving a hyphenated identity because assimilation into mainstream America is a threat to the minority group culture. It may be presented as a goal, but that goal is an illusion. True assimilation in to American society means cancelling out or looking down upon your greater cultural background. In the *Paper Menagerie*, Americanism is presented as the dominant culture, the more economic and valuable association in comparison to Chinese culture which is painted as strange and cheap. In *The Plot Against America,* Americanism is presented as the ultimate goal, the illusion of the American dream is used to keep people loyal and patriotic, but it is just that, an illusion. True assimilation in to American culture mean de-culturation of the individual. This creates an incomplete person, a weak and angry child who does not understand why a part of them is so hated. Both Jack and Philip struggle with achieving a hyphenated identity for many reasons, but the most apparent reason is the instinct of one culture to look down on another just because they are different. That is usually the case with a dominant culture, it is always trying to exert itself by eradicating any form of “otherness” that could threaten its power.

Both texts present the struggle of its main characters to achieve a hyphenated identity while attempting to allow them to retain ethnic group culture while identifying as Americans, but neither seem to retain much of their ethnic culture by the end of their respective stories. At the end of Roth’s novel, FDR is reelected and history veers back on track after what is a long and terrifying two-year detour. The Roth family once again has the opportunities the once had, a chance at the American dream, but Philip seems forever changed. He does not simply accept his hyphenated identity, but is left with a huge psychological scar. On the other hand, in Liu’s short story, Jack does come to the realization that turning his back on his mother was not right. I believe that the slight push from his girlfriend Susan, who acknowledges his mother’s culture in a positive way, and shows appreciation for it, leads his in the direction of achieving his hyphenated identity. He feels ashamed after having his mother’s letter read to him by a Chinese tourist, “the young woman handed the paper back to me. I could not bear to look into her face (76),” and understands that he has made a terrible mistake by denying a larger part of his identity. In the end, he embraces Laohu, the tiger, and in a way, it symbolizes that he is reclaiming and once again embracing his mother and her culture.

References

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, Print. <https://dynamicsubspace.net/2009/03/04/w-e-b-du-bois-carol-swain-and-african-american-duality/>

Liu, Ken. *Paper Menagerie*, 2001, Online/Print.

Roth, Philip. *The Plot Against America*, 2003, Print.