

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## We Carry It Into Our Future

Chiwan Choi · Wednesday, November 23rd, 2016

I have started this piece so many times already. I mean I often write versions of an opening to anything new I write. And it's not that I ever thought it would be a quick assignment; nothing about your mother is that simple.

Then came and went the election. Then came the silence and it stayed.

Judeth says it's ok, maybe it is actually good, to sit in the hurt for a while.

So I have been. Sitting in the hurt. Raging too. On the verge of screaming at every single white neighbor I cross paths with here in Pittsburgh.

I also read things. This [on point analogy](#) by John Scalzi. And [this reminder that white people don't give a fuck](#). Reading [this beautiful essay on trauma](#) by Zoë Ruiz. And [this piece](#) by Jo Scott-Coe.

Sitting in the hurt. And trying to figure out what the hurt, my hurt, really is about.

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On election evening, I was invited to speak with Janice Lee's class at CalArts. It is a class on the Korean concept of 'han,' what we, for lack of a better English translation, may consider *inherited trauma*, even though it is both more and something completely different and something undefinable.

We talked. There were some questions. I can't even remember them anymore. I read a few poems from *Abductions*.

I do remember this (although what I'm remembering may all have been created in my head):

All but one of the students were Korean. There was a bunker. We were in it. For two hours, we were both excluded from the world and safe together, these people that looked like me. We were sad and scared and curious and bonded. I wasn't alone.

We spoke of ghosts, whether they exist, whether we are the ghosts.

Do we exist then? Are we trauma? Are we history?

What are we in the future? Are we responsible for carrying trauma, the one we inherited, to pass it

on to the next generation? What are we supposed to do with sacred things that identify us if they are also the things that kill us?

Later that night I took a quiet walk around Highland Park with my dear friend who reminds me of everything that is good and beautiful about Los Angeles, its history and its heart and its fearlessness.

She pointed out the raccoon families crossing in the dark ahead of us. The streets were otherwise empty and we kept making turns into dead ends.

For a moment my body thought we'd forgotten how to return home.

Silence had fallen in the night and covered everything.

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I don't want to write about this, but I guess I have to say some things about the election and Trump and the DNC and Hillary and working class and white people and Michael Moore and all that.

So here's a list of things I've considered and raged about, internally and outwardly:

- The DNC, more specifically the two party system, has ALWAYS been fucked up. But a whole bunch of you took pride in being a Democrat and not some stupid Republican. Until a woman became your candidate. Then you no longer could stomach how fucked up the DNC was. This was obviously the time to rebel against it. I mean, was she more ruthless? More crooked?
- I didn't realize we had to be racist and white to be part of the working class.
- Lots of you like that the *New York Times* is pointing at a neighborhood in which some black residents didn't vote for either candidates. They say this is why Trump was elected.
- Because this is more acceptable than blaming the 60 million who did vote for a candidate, whose promises, at least the specific ones, all had to do with getting rid of people of color.
- If turnout was the problem and Hillary ended up with more votes than anyone other than Obama, then maybe the answer is not listening to racist white people around the country, but to stop nominating white people.
- She won more votes than any white male candidate in history. Stop nominating white men. We hate white men. The numbers back me up.
- I am not at all upset about 3rd-party voters. I am upset that their radical act meant they would just pick another white person instead of writing in any one of countless amazing people of color in this motherfucking country. Really. If you don't have a person of color in your life that is at least 4 million times more awesome than Jill Stein or Gary Johnson, your life is in shambles.
- I will no longer use the term "well meaning." Attempting to silence me is not well meaning. Attempting to whitewash racists is not well meaning.
- So many people in my life saw how racist all the voter registration attempts of the past few years have been. They also saw how racist things such as *Breitbart News* have been. And they watched as the executive chair of *Breitbart News* ran the Trump campaign. They saw how Voter ID and closing of polling places impacted voter turn out in predominantly black communities. Somehow, once this resulted in a Trump win, so many of the same people couldn't get themselves to call it racist.
- I'm tired of being pointed toward some great thing another white guy is saying about all this. Hedges. Moore. Greenwald. Oliver. Colbert. I don't care who they are and how right they are. I don't want to hear anything from them anymore. Nothing. Zero.

- Only black women (once again) put themselves in the front lines and tried to save the people in this fucking country.
- Someone on my FB shared an article about how to fix the DNC so it can once again be FDR's party. But somehow is upset about Trump's Muslim registry. With no irony.
- My father taught me not to trust people. I didn't take the lesson seriously enough.

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Maybe it is still about my mother. Maybe it always was.

Before she got married, before she'd ever been set up with my dad, my mother was running a successful business making and selling knitwear. She was happy. Excited to prove to others what she'd known all along, that she could survive, flourish, excel on her own terms.

But she was a woman in Korea and it didn't matter. What mattered is that her dad, one of the worst men I've had in my life, wanted her to get married and my dad met his approval. What mattered is that she give up her business and become a wife. What mattered is that she be a daughter and a woman.

I don't remember how old I was exactly. Somewhere in my mid-20s I think. My mom asked me something unimportant and I was feeling annoyed, like she was nagging me.

I yelled back at her. She got quiet, and I was about to go sit down when she looked up at me.

"Don't ever yell at me again," mom said. "Your dad has done that to me all these years. You are not going to do that to me too."

I had always spoken to her that way. That's what I had learned from watching my parents. I had learned that that was ok. She was supposed to just walk away.

But that day she didn't.

I haven't yelled at her like that since.

Some time after that she told me to never make my wife take my name. To not erase the person I marry the way she was erased. She spoke with so much anger.

My father has been a wonderful father and in many ways a great husband. He's taken care of our family and taught me and my brother so many things. If I could choose a father, I would choose him again.

But my father also taught me misogyny, whether he wanted to or not, whether that was just a byproduct of his desire for me to have a good place in the world, the place that as a man he was used to. He taught me to value my mother and my wife and other women that would come in and out of my life a little less each time he belittled or intimidated my mother.

I can't point at all the good he has done and my own love for him and think that erases this part of him.

Over the years, I watched power shift from my father to my mother as he became weaker and weaker, no longer the man who could carry a refrigerator up to the second floor on his own. My

mother was at a point when she was excited about learning new things and we'd talk politics and sports and race relations and movies—everything we could think of.

With each new bit of knowledge, my mother gained back some of the power she'd lost when she was forced to marry, when she was thrown into the kitchen at her in-laws to cook and clean all day for my father and his siblings and his parents.

After the election, she and I stared at each other quietly. My father sat on the couch watching TV, joking and telling us it's no big deal. She wasn't laughing. In her face, I saw an old familiar pain.

She doesn't care about Hillary's policies nor the fact that Park Geun-hye, the first woman president of Korea, did a really bad thing.

She only cares that she is being forced to watch these women being publicly destroyed, humiliated, torn apart. She only cares about the glee with which it seems to be happening.

Because she never wanted to experience this again: the power shifting back to my father.

She is back in that kitchen at my grandparents' house, being mentally and emotionally tortured by my father's siblings. She is reliving it all while people argue about game plans. She is watching herself be eviscerated while we worry about poor white people.

I think of all the times she has told me that she is glad she didn't have a daughter, never quite having understood why, the assumption just being she preferred sons.

It's clearer now: she didn't want to pass along the trauma she had inherited. Han. She wanted it to end with her.

It was always about my mother, this sitting in the pain. She has been doing it her whole life.

And I don't know what I'm supposed to do about it.

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