Diversity for Whom?: Interrogating California's Racial Diversity Through California Literature

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California has been popularly imagined as a model for diversity through the consistent integration of various immigrant groups that continues in the present. Although racial conflict in the Golden State's history is well documented, it has always appeared less when compared to more brutal conflicts present in other regions of the nation. At the same time, popular portrayals of California often depict the state as a leader for progressivism, and thus a model for diversity. California may be farther ahead than other regions in the United States in constructing an equitable multi-racial society, but California's diversity has many flaws presented below. These flaws need to be recognized and known by a wider audience to place California on the proper path to constructing a multi-racial society grounded in equality.

It is easy to dismiss literature as an invaluable source for understanding the world because it is fictional; however, when utilized appropriately, literature can serve as a valuable fount of knowledge. Literature often captures key struggles and experiences of the time of its creation, making it a valid way for interrogating race relations. Thus, in demonstrating the flaws with California's diversity, I will be interrogating California novels written in the late 1900s and early 2000s. In particular, Le This Diem Thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, Maxine Hong Kinston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Rick Rivera's *A Fabricated Mexican* will be used to examine California's claims of diversity. Together, this collection of novels offers a broad range of experiences in California's history and recent past. More importantly, these novels platform the voices of minority races who would benefit from a perfectly diverse society that popular portrayals of California claim it to be. As a result, these novels lay a solid foundation from which to critique the flaws inherent in California's diversity.

[1] As an editor, the author recused themselves from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

Although the existence of a multi-racial society in California is no small feat, the Golden State is far from being a true model of racial diversity. Digging below the surface of California's racial diversity reveals many flaws that prevent all groups of people from enjoying full acceptance. More specifically, the ability of people, especially racial others,[2] to seek full inclusion into the dominant racial group is nearly impossible as a result of multiculturalism. While multiculturalism calls for the celebration of racial diversity which justifies the admission of ethnic groups into California, that celebration often falls short in developing solutions that address structural racism. As a result, multiculturalism fails to bring full acceptance to ethnic groups because it does not bring full attention to the underlying issues of marginalized, racialized groups.[3] At the same time, efforts taken by ethnic groups seeking full inclusion often result in the development of a new identity rooted in duality, allowing for individuals to enjoy the cultural practices of both their original and adopted identities.[4] The development of these identities helps to mitigate the struggles of limited inclusion brought by multiculturalism, but are far from being a permanent solution to racial exclusion. The structural racism that plagues California is rooted in the continued existence of whiteness as a category of inclusion/exclusion, which must become widely recognized before it can be fixed and establish racial equality in California.

Complicating California's Diversity from a Refugee Standpoint

Le Thi Diem Thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is a collection of short stories that center a refugee family from Vietnam who settled in San Diego during the 1970s.

[2] Race is a social construct and thus has no grounding in biology or phenotypes. As a result, race is constantly being redefined with the passage of time based on assertions of power and inequality. In recognition of this reality, I utilize the term "racial other" to recognize that the people who were the victims of racism were victimized for reasons exclusive to their particular time period and region. Within the context of US and California race relations, "racial other" is synonymous with "non-white." While I do use "non-white" from time to time, I utilize "racial other" as a reminder that race is fabricated and to contribute to racial theory broadly, as opposed to US race relations alone.

[3] Mark Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America* (University of California Press, 2017), 12.

[4] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 80.

The work highlights the contradictions in California between its image as a diverse, multicultural triumph and the realities of limited refugee inclusion. In comparison with immigrants, refugees stand apart as they are threatened less with deportation and thus, are often perceived differently by the public. As scholar Yen Espiritu notes, the master narrative of refugees presents them as the victims of an event beyond their control and in search of a refuge capable of offering new opportunities and prosperity. In regards to California, this master narrative has not only painted refugees as helpless victims, but has romanticized California as the ideal refuge where upward mobility awaits all "proper" refugees.[5] In describing the various experiences the family lives through in California, the novel reveals the inability of refugees to attain full inclusion in the US and brings discriminatory policies that prevent refugees from enjoying the opportunities California has to offer to the forefront.

The narrator beginning school after her family arrives in California demonstrates limits placed on refugees to attain full inclusion into the dominant culture. In order to go to school, she must wear an American dress and plastic sandals, which she is uncomfortable in. She complains about it to no avail, and when she gets to school, she is completely alienated by her peers as they all play with each other during recess without her, despite wearing her American uniform.[6] The narrator's father makes an effort to have her attain full inclusion by dressing her in American clothes. However, the swift alienation by her peers demonstrates that the narrator's racial characteristics are too strongly inscribed in her appearance to allow her clothing to change how she appears to others. At the same time, the decision made to dress the narrator in American clothes reveals the restrictions placed on refugees seeking American acceptance, who can only attain inclusion by copying American ways of living. Although the narrator's attempt at assimilation failed to satisfy her peers, her ability to

[5] Yen Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (University of California Press, 2014), 2.

[6] Le Thi Diem Thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 16-17 & 19.

embrace an American identity demonstrates the duality of her identity. After all, the narrator managed to leave her Vietnamese identity at home in order to perform like a white American at school, which demonstrates the two cultural worlds she cycles between school and home.

The story also demonstrates the limits of California's multiculturalism through the existence of discriminatory policies that make life difficult for the refugee family. In the novel, an elderly couple sponsors the refugee family through their church group, allowing for them to enter the US.[7] While the initiative taken by individuals to bring in racial others shows a positive aspect of multiculturalism, (especially for refugees), the logistics of the procedure to get into the US, however, demonstrates otherwise. The highly selective process, replete with excessive legal documents and bureaucratic red tape, continues long after the family arrives in the US.[8] Determining who gets admission into the US reflects multiculturalism's intent to maintain the status quo, even if it means maintaining a highly regulatory system that screens out more refugees than it admits. Furthermore the novel shows that, in spite of California's decision to accept refugees, the maintenance of oppressive systems restricts the refugees who make it past the highly selective and laborious asylum process. The very first paragraph of the novel details the constant migration the Diem family experienced in California by describing the various residences the family took up.[9] When getting into the details behind these migrations, it becomes clear that the refugee family lives a very unstable, insecure life in California. For example, the family's landlord evicted them from their home in Linda Vista because the landlord wanted to build a more expensive housing complex in the area.[10] Being unable to meet a higher rent, the refugee family had to find a new home, demonstrating the financial struggles of refugees in California. More importantly, the lack of support given to refugees in adjusting to California shows that California's multiculturalism

[7] Le Thi Diem Thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 4.
[8] Ibid., 4-5.
[9] Ibid., 3.
[10] Ibid., 96.

is more than willing to boast racial diversity in advocating for new racial groups to arrive than to address the underlying issues that oppress refugees. Overall, multiculturalism may benefit refugees by encouraging the arrival of new racial groups, but that benefit is limited because not all refugees are welcomed. Once welcomed into California, refugees struggle with identity because they are excluded from being fully American.

Dismantling California's Diversity from a Chinese-American Perspective

The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston is an account of the author's experiences growing up as a Chinese-American in California. The book does not follow a strict timeline. Instead, each of its five chapters focuses on a specific character and their interactions with and influence on Kingston. Born in the US to Chinese parents, Kingston relates her experience with an identity crisis stemming from her first-generation status throughout the novel. Because of multiculturalism's limits on immigration, Kingston never fully adopts an American national identity, despite being born in the US. At the same time, Kingston's mother places harsh restrictions on her behavior, preventing Kingston from desiring and adopting a Chinese racial identity. As a result, Kingston never fully adopts an identity based solely on her Chinese racial identity or American national identity, despite having a birth right to both identities. Although excluded from both identities in one way or another, Kingston still manages to adopt a mixed cultural identity that bridges both of her cultures.

Kingston's birth in the US highlights the difficulties American born children of Chinese immigrants have with being accepted into Chinese culture. This can be seen through the interactions Kingston has with her aunt, Moon. Moon arrives in the US from China to find her husband who migrated to the US long before she did. Brave, Kingston's mother (and Moon's sister), agrees to take in Moon temporarily as they both work to find her husband. Moon's temporary stay with Kingston's family is best summarized with Moon asking Brave,

"Why didn't you teach your girls to be demure?"[11] Moon continually and harshly judges all the cultural oddities Kingston and her siblings have, to the point where she is not able to develop a strong relationship with any of her nieces or nephews. At the same time, Kingston and her siblings are quick to ignore their aunt and her critiques by avoiding long conversations with her.[12] The conflict between Moon and her nephews and nieces reveals that Kingston does not fully belong to Chinese culture, while the lack of motivation to reach Moon's standards demonstrates a lack of desire to claim a monolithic Chinese identity by Kingston and her siblings. This desire from Chinese-Americans to separate themselves from certain aspects of Chinese culture manifests itself more clearly in Kingston's dispute with her mother's expectations of her. For example, Brave expects her daughter to attend Chinese school and to eventually marry a wealthy man at a relatively young age, expectations which stem from her own cultural experience in China. Towards the end of the book, Kingston confronts Brave about her expectations, feeling them unfair and unreasonable. During this confrontation, Kingston renounces Chinese school in favor of American schools, promising to chase after her dreams of going to college because the white Americans at her school think she would be exceptional in college. As a result, Brave forces Kingston to leave home.[13] This conflict's roots originate from cultural differences between mother and daughter and highlight Kingston's inability to be fully accepted into Chinese culture. Brave's expectations for Kingston only appear foreign to Kingston because she had grown accustomed to American ways of living. Thus, Kingston may boast Chinese ancestry, but her access to Chinese cultural practices is severely limited by the restrictions her mother has placed around Chineseness. In refusing to conform to her mother's unreasonable restrictions, Kingston is essentially denied access to her Chinese heritage. At the same time, Brave's expectations of

[11] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 133.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 201-204.

Kingston make claiming a Chinese identity especially undesirable because they directly conflict with white American norms. The lack of compatibility between Chinese and American cultures, as perceived by Kingston's mother, demonstrates that multiculturalism is not intended to bring about racial equality. Rather, the glorification of racial differences serves to preserve distinct identities and limit the amount of racial others who are able to attain full inclusion.

The limits of California's multiculturalism for Chinese-Americans does not impact people discreetly because even children can recognize it. Tolerance for the Chinese living in the US only extended to those thought to be capable of supporting themselves financially. Notably, the author displayed this awareness from a very young age, demonstrating how ingrained multiculturalism's limits are within California's Chinese-American population. For example, when Kingston talks about her parents with her beloved sixth grade teacher, she remembers "silence in front of the most understanding teacher. There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China."[14] In this moment, Kingston understood that it was too risky to reveal the truth of her father's past as a gambler, not a farmer, when talking to white Americans, referred to as "ghosts" throughout the novel. Kingston recognized that the dominant culture's perception of immigrants with certain jobs made her father especially vulnerable for removal by deportation should anyone discover his past as a gambler, despite her father no longer holding a problematic job since his arrival in the US. Thus, even as a child, Kingston understood the strict class requisites placed on Chinese immigrants by white Americans. Her experience illuminates the continuance of California's long history of denying acceptance and limiting tolerance of the Chinese in strictly economic terms. Furthermore, Kingston's inability to fully express herself around her closest teacher and non-Chinese peers reflects her

[14] Ibid., 183.

inability to attain full inclusion within the dominant culture. As a result, Kingston cannot claim an American identity because of multiculturalism's demand for racial others to behave in ways acceptable to the dominant culture, nor is she able to fully cling to her Chinese identity and the unjust expectations that come with it. Overall, Kingston's identity struggle illuminates the flaws within California's diversity that prevent the state from becoming a model for diversity.

Although critical race scholar and activist Gloria Anzaldúa coined the mestiza consciousness when talking about the Chicanx experience, the duality of identity is highly applicable to immigrant families of different racial backgrounds. The mestiza consciousness aims to "break down the subject-object duality that keeps her [an immigrant] a prisoner and to show...how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between white race and the colored...lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundations of our lives."[15] Duality allows for mixed-race people to take in values and practices of either racial group, which is useful for dealing with the exclusion brought by multiculturalism. In *The Woman Warrior,* Kingston adopts a mestiza consciousness by occupying the liminal space between her two identities, never gaining full inclusion with either of her racial/national groups. Instead, she learns to live with an identity that is not quite fully American or Chinese. Kingston's decision and ability to stay in contact with her mother points to this. Even though Brave expels her from the house, Kingston continues to visit and talk to Brave, who keeps criticizing Kingston for her lack of visits and way of living.[16] Kingston's ability to stay in contact with Brave after being kicked out of the house demonstrates that she has not been completely rejected by her Chinese culture. At the same time, Kingston's decision to continue visiting Brave represents a desire to maintain aspects of her Chinese identity, but

[15] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 80.
[16] Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 100.

actively decides against attempting to adopt all Chinese customs. Overall, Kingston has adopted a new identity that allows her the freedom to enjoy life without being confined to a single culture/identity by rejecting the oppressive aspects of Chinese culture. In adopting a dual identity, Kingston finds a way to persist and live life within the constraints of multiculturalism. Although the mestiza consciousness works for Kingston, it may not be sustainable for everyone. Furthermore, the development of a mestiza consciousness to deal with the exclusion brought by multiculturalism illuminates its shortcomings. After all, had multiculturalism really brought racial equality, the need to develop a mestiza consciousness to survive racial exclusion would not be necessary. Kingston's struggle as a Chinese-American in California parallels the struggles faced by Mexican-Americans residing in the golden state.

Unraveling California's Diversity from a Chicanx Point of View

A Fabricated Mexican by Rick P. Rivera follows the life of Ricardo "Ricky" Coronado, the son of Mexican immigrants in California. Like *The Woman Warrior*, the novel does not follow a strict timeline, but begins with Ricky as a child and tells various short stories about Ricky that loosely move forward in time and end with Ricky pursuing a doctoral degree. Being born in the US to Mexican parents causes Ricky to struggle with his identity, especially since he does not fit neatly into cultural expectations of either Mexicans or Americans. Ricky makes attempts to belong to both of those cultures throughout his life, but is never truly successful. Instead by the end of the novel, Ricky learns to accept that he is not fully American nor Mexican, allowing him to be content with the duality of his identity.

From a young age, Ricky failed to fit into traditional beliefs of Mexican masculinity, grounded in notions of hard work and being physically active. This is apparent in his refusal to play little league baseball during his summer break because he wanted to watch TV and

read instead.[17] Ricky's mother disliked her son spending his free time reading, as she believed it had little value, most likely because reading did not give Ricky the physique necessary for farm labor, which his mother required him to do the following year.[18] Unsurprisingly, Ricky found no comfort in farm work, and swiftly protested working the fields by refusing to leave the car when his mother announced she would no longer work alongside Ricky and his siblings for the remainder of the harvest season. In explaining his resistance, Ricky exclaimed "We always have to work. And I get in trouble for doing something like reading."[19] In other words, Ricky rejected the expectation placed on him by his Mexican heritage of constant physical activity for both leisure and work. In doing so, Ricky received quite a few scoldings from his mother, demonstrating Ricky's inability to fully belong to his Mexican culture. In taking up reading as his favorite pastime, Ricky instead attempted to attain full inclusion with his American identity. However, the oppressive systems in California, that are strengthened by multiculturalism, relegate Mexican immigrants to farm labor, which in turn shapes the form of masculine performance in immigrant families that reside in California. Without the racialized expectation of Mexican immigrants being physical laborers, Ricky may have had more freedom at home to choose his occupation and leisure activities, making his relationship to his mother and Mexican heritage easier.

Despite being born in the US, Ricky experiences constant othering throughout college, demonstrating the limits of multiculturalism's acceptance of American born immigrant children. Early in his college career, Ricky eats dinner at his friend Greg's house, where he not only felt alienated by the standard practices of eating Anglo cuisine, but also by the conversation Greg's family had that he never experienced with his own family.[20] Taken

[17] Rick P. Rivera, *A Fabricated Mexican* (Arte Publico Press, 1995), 23-26.
[18] Ibid., 29-31.
[19] Ibid., 35.
[20] Ibid., 102-104.

together, the dinner served to remind Ricky that he did not truly belong to white American culture. Ricky may have been born in the US and taken up hobbies traditionally associated with white Americans, like reading, but his upbringing in a Mexican household prevented him from learning customs to feel welcomed by white Americans. Ricky's lack of knowledge of white culture was not the only alienating factor of the dinner. At one point, Greg's mother critiqued Ricky's appearance and went on to talk about how prepared Greg was to excel in higher education.[21] Greg's mother othered Ricky by implying he would fail in college, solely based on his appearance. Her opinion about Ricky's educational ability was undoubtedly influenced by the discourse surrounding Mexicans in higher education, where traditional representation associates them with physical labor and low-income jobs. Greg's mother later warns her son against mirroring Ricky's appearance in order to protect him from receiving any influences that could lead towards low-income labor. More importantly, in warning her son against copying Ricky's appearance, Greg's mother reminded Ricky that his racial characteristics were highly visible to white people like herself.

Ricky proved Greg's mother wrong by finishing his undergraduate education and earning a master's degree with high honors; however, Ricky continued to encounter discourses that discounted his ability to do well in academia. Shortly after graduation, Ricky landed a job as a guest lecturer, but Brian, a tutor for his beginning writing class, accused Ricky of "doing a tremendous disservice to these kids."[22] Ricky's educational background made him far more prepared to teach an introductory English course than Brian, yet Brian felt emboldened enough to complain about Ricky's teaching ability to his face without presenting a compelling reason.[23] Brian felt justified in his critique because of white privilege, with Brian believing racial others, like Ricky, are not capable of excelling in higher education. It

[21] Rick P. Rivera, *A Fabricated Mexican*, 104-105.
[22] Ibid., 156.
[23] Ibid.

matters little how much inclusion racial others feel they can achieve by earning credentials like master's degrees. Racial characteristics are too inscribed in modern representation to allow Ricky to feel truly accepted among white Americans in higher education or to achieve a degree of whiteness himself.

The constant othering of Ricky in higher education for his appearance demonstrates the insufficiencies of California's model of multiculturalism. Ricky is eligible for various scholarships and benefits from affirmative action that celebrate diversity in higher education, but the people who surround him constantly work to make him feel out of place there.[24] The institution may be doing its part in reversing the history of educational disenfranchisement, but as shown above, the white dominant culture refuses to extend full inclusion to minority groups. Thus, California is fast to celebrate the diversity that appears to exist within its borders but does little to address the underlying issues that make racial groups feel unwelcome in California. Furthermore, Ricky's experience in academia, from his undergraduate education to his time as a lecturer within the California State University system, shows the flaws of institutions built to give otherwise economically and racially disenfranchised students opportunities for education. However, as Ricky's experiences demonstrate, the distance between promises of diversifying academia and the reality of limits placed on racial minorities, who can never fully gain enough social capital to end microaggressions, prevents even the most progressive institutions from allowing racial others to attain full inclusion.

Conclusion

California boasts a highly diverse population, but the existence of diversity does not ensure perfect race relations exist in the Golden State. For any society to claim itself as a model of racial diversity, it must establish racial equality free from structural racism.

[24] Rick P. Rivera, *A Fabricated Mexican,* 130-132.

Although California is often imagined as a place of opportunity where even the most marginalized are able to attain social mobility, inequalities between races continue to exist as the result of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism glorifies diversity, which encourages the development of a multi-racial society, but it ultimately falls short of full inclusion because it does not destroy whiteness as a category of exclusion. As demonstrated from a refugee, second-generation immigrant, and Chicanx standpoint, racial others are able to claim space within California, but ultimately fail to claim an American identity and advantages that come alongside it. With racial characteristics too strongly inscribed in modern representation, racial others are easily discriminated against based on their appearance. Although multiculturalism excludes racial others from fully belonging, racial others often adopt aspects of Americanness and their original cultures to navigate life in California. This duality of identity, referred to as the mestiza consciousness by Gloria Anzaldúa, is relevant beyond the Chicanx experience with other racial groups capable of adopting it to combat their exclusion. However, the development of a dual identity is far from a permanent solution to the structural racism that plagues California's race relations. Rather than spouting multiculturalism as a model for race relations, the flaws need to be more widely recognized in order to dismantle it and whiteness as a category for exclusion.

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