

Learning of the Self Through Others

According to Rocio G. Davis's piece, "The Self in the Text versus the Self as Text: Asian American Autobiographical Strategies," Asian American autobiographies generally emphasize the "protagonist's growing comprehension of the meaning or value that society places on questions and attitudes about ethnic differences, historical reconstruction, and the place of their communities in American societies" (Rocio, 41). In Chelsey Kitazawa's piece, "The Story of a Japanese American Pitzer Student," she presents brief snapshots of her life experience with her interactions with her grandpa and growing up as a Yonsei (fourth generation) Japanese American. In her hometown of Torrance, Kitazawa discusses her "growing comprehension meaning or value that society places on questions and attitudes about ethnic differences" (Rocio, 41). In the society she lived in, there was never a problem with ethnic differences because there was an equal balance of each ethnicity. However, her attitude in being part of one of the three Asian American subgroups was an embarrassment and admits that she was "ashamed of being Asian...and just wanted to fit in with the mainstream" (Kitazawa, 9). However as she entered college, Kitazawa's felt overwhelmed because of the "place of [her college] community" was now predominately white. Being a minority in college inspired Kitazawa to reach back to her cultural roots and learn more about her family history. Knowing the cultural roots and family history, Kitazawa believes this is a crucial part in constructing an identity. Kitazawa reconstructs her family member's memories and

stories of growing up as a Sansei generation. Her vague memoirs of her deceased grandfather plays a strong role in Kitazawa's search to find more about her family history. Although Kitazawa's construction of her own life can be considered a traditional autobiography, can we consider Kitazawa's work in reconstructing her family's life stories as autobiographical as well? There is questionability whether writing a life story of a person is only limited to the one who experienced the event.

In Rocio G. Davis's essay *she discusses that* the short story cycle as an autobiography, which "emphasizes the constructedness of an ethnic identity, the importance of the relational, and power of textual formation" (Davis, 46). The writers of short story cycles do not "fix" their identity through nullifying the basis of their identity found by personal history and evolving perceptions of self through traditional autobiographies. The short story cycle also demonstrates the narrator's process of memory as "non-linear, associative, non-temporal, and fragmented and incomplete" (Davis, 46). By organizing separate narratives, the author is able to control each important memory, and understand the significance that pertains to their personal formation and self-representation. In Kitazawa's work, she reconstructs the life stories through the oral narratives of her three relatives. The three relatives, her father, aunt, and uncle, are siblings that hold different perspectives and experiences growing up as a Sansei generation. Equated to holding one piece of a three-piece puzzle, each sibling hold unique morals and stories taught by their deceased father. In each story, the sibling recollections signify a fragmented identity of their father. When reading the stories alone, there is a "fragmentary characteristic of this autobiography" (Davis, 46). But when the texts are placed together and read one after the other, the pieces of the puzzle

are connected. Each story now exists as a “coherent whole, united by a series of motifs and themes” (Davis, 46). These stories now existing as a coherent whole, indicate a symbol of a family’s cultural history. This history pertains back to the construction of Kitazawa’s identity through the learning of her family’s roots.

Through manipulation, textual representation is a way to perceive and write about the self. Ondaaje’s *Running in the Family* and Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* both emphasize the act of writing called textual reconstruction. The two authors display how they represent themselves in their work through the characters in their life stories. The stories are arranged to create a “logical, aesthetically controlled structural pattern that supports the development of selfhood” (Davis 50). The way in how Onaatje “gathers and inscribes this history” because it is the only way to seize his past and write him into the text is similar to Kitazawa’s motives of writing her autobiography on her family (Davis, 51). FLIP. The decision by Kitazawa to create a textual representation of her family is to remember to “not just seize the past, but to preserve one’s history. Through writing, [she] can place my self in a text and leave a final imprint on the world she lives in” (Kitazawa, 11).

However, questions arise regarding the autobiographical context of Kitazawa’s piece. The context of the short story cycle and textual reconstruction, which were formally revisions of established literary genres, are used as successful autobiographical model. According to Eakins’s common form of autobiography called “relational life,” the proximate other can serve to write the self-story experienced by another person. In order to write an autobiography of another person, the proximate other must have a connection with the biographical subject. They can be connected as a sibling, friend,

lover, but most often occurs among parents. By writing through the view of other people, one can better understand oneself. However, the view one is writing the autobiography from must be proximate. Also, in writing an autobiography of another person, there is uncertainty of how much of one's story is authentic. Even if Kitazawa's stories of her relatives were to be found false, Kitazawa's work can still be considered autobiographical because of her use of textual manipulation. By using manipulation, it is a new way to perceive the self, through stories of others.

Bibliography

Davis, Rocio G. "Chapter 2: The Self in the Text versus the Self as Text: Asian American Autobiographical Strategies." Asian American Literary Studies. 22 George Square, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP Ltd, 2006. 41-63.