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IDENTIFYING LOSS, ANIMATING MELANCHOLY: ASIAN-AMERICAN NARRATIVES  
IN *AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER*, *SPIRITED AWAY*, AND *BAO*

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts in English at

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Supervising Committee:

Dr. Timothy Richardson, Supervising Professor

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## ABSTRACT

IDENTIFYING LOSS, ANIMATING MELANCHOLY: ASIAN-AMERICAN NARRATIVES  
IN *AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER*, *SPIRITED AWAY*, AND *BAO*

Jered Connery Mabaquiao, MA.

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2022

Supervising Professors: Dr. Timothy Richardson, Dr. Penelope Ingram, Dr. Neill Matheson

Animated film provides a complex illustration of the creativity behind constructing narratives. This thesis aims to explore the way that racial and cultural identity are displayed within animated film. The purpose of this thesis will be paying close attention to the intersections of psychoanalytic theories of loss that are placed on a spectrum with terms such as trauma, mourning and melancholia all within the scope of racial identification. These terms will be worked through from texts from Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as well as works that expand on these notions. These psychoanalytic texts will be applied to Nickelodeon's "Avatar: The Last Airbender," Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, and Domee Shi's "Bao" produced by Disney and Pixar studios. These works of animation seem to have helped bring animation into the spotlight in the US. These films could be seen as primarily enforcing westernized, often eurocentric, ideology, so the rise of Asian American animation sheds new light on how stories are being told and through which lenses. I specifically explore the Asian-American immigrant narrative throughout this thesis and the effects of these narratives with the audience.

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## DEDICATION

To Lucas, who has made me curiouser and curiouser

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## INTRODUCTION

“To leave the world of objects and enter the world of words was to return to the site of acquired grief.”

-Anne Boyer, “How to go from Poetry to Art”

Walt Disney Animation Studios recently provided an advisory on various products, contents, and platforms (Disney+) that regard “negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we [the corporation], want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together.” The advisory goes on to state that Disney is committed to creating inspirational stories with aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe. While the construction of cultural film stories being told is not new to criticism, our understanding of animated films could benefit from new light being shed on the matter by thinking through the viewing of animated films.

I have seen the advisory on the 1940 film *Dumbo* which depicts animated crows having a musical homage to racist minstrel shows, where White performers with blackened faces and tattered clothing imitated and ridiculed enslaved Africans on southern plantations. The leader of the group in *Dumbo* is Jim Crow, which obviously shares the name of laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. In "The Song of the Roustabouts," faceless Black workers toil away to offensive lyrics like "When we get our pay, we throw our money all away" (StoriesMatter). Past construction of scenes and characters like the one displayed in *Dumbo*



warrant a much closer look into the identification of different racialized characters in animated films and the relationships that are constructed between racial audiences.

This history between misrepresentation and identity is something that was common in animation in the early 1900s when animated film began developing. I will be using the psychoanalytic concept of identification, notably, symbolic identification from Jacques Lacan in Seminar IX “Identification” as a way to explore the implication of representation first through identification. Further elaborated on in Alan Sheridan’s translation of *Écrits*, Identification could be thought as “the transformation that takes place in the subject when [they] assume an image” (76). To assume an image in a transformative manner would mean for the subject to (mis)recognize themselves in another thing. The relationship between the subject and the signifier is illustrated through the work of film animation being that animation itself, as I will argue, is a space for identification because of the transformation or recomposition that is presented and represented through the medium. In other words, identification might be defined as someone who sees themselves in another, be it a group or object, or in this case, an animated representation but especially through the differences that are displayed from a group or in a film. As Donald Crafton, author of *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928* states, “[animated] subjects, then, however ‘haunted,’ were also representations of animators’ enduring concern with autokinesis, movement in itself, the stuff of animation” (33). To bring something to life, might then mean to breathe one’s own breath into a thing. In relation to psychoanalytic identification, it might be thought that the subject animates the differences in another subject, character, or image. The process of identification for psychoanalysis is highlighted through difference, that is, that which the subject is not. In other words, viewers of an animated film will identify characters that are different within its own world in comparison to other characters. This difference is extended

to the experience of the viewer's identification in reality. It seems that characters perform negative identification, that is, recognizing difference of difference. This recognition pushes difference onto the Other via racialized characters which is to say that racialized animated characters carry an inherent difference in their creation and it is the work of the viewers to identify with difference as such.

Throughout, it will be argued that animation — especially from Disney and Pixar — reflect the fantasy of human desires in that animated films allow for the persistence (and storytelling) of a particular version of human history that is distilled into specific characters. It is here that I want to turn attention to the way that storytelling in animated films allows for certain ethnic and cultural stories to be told. And while certainly, the misrepresentation of raced and ethnic minorities has been increasingly problematic for Black and African-American citizens, this misidentification has also been an issue for Asian-American citizens.

The Asian diaspora has gained a significant amount of American attention in the last few years; from the rise of Anime – hand drawn and computer animated works originating in Japan – to the political discourse surrounding Asian immigrants, and the (often negative) attention Asian-Americans had received from Donald Trump during his presidency amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic, which he dubbed “the China Virus.” The latter has contributed to the tone of the Asian American socio-cultural moment, or in other words, the way that stories were being told that involved Asian-Americans. With a hugely popular studio such as Disney making advisories about their content, this project aims to provide an important perspective on identification concerning the Asian-American experience and the assimilation into a culture that inherently erases part of their identity by traumatic experiences such as immigration and identification.

Since characters of animated films are not real-life people, in what ways can raced subjects identify with these animated characters and how does this identification become significant, if at all? Identification through animation suggests that the subject must be able to recognize themselves in the cartoon, through obvious differences, moving them to some sort of alignment with the image. Animated film then provides another facet to this argument that emphasizes identification and difference which becomes significant to viewers who are able to recognize similar aspects of themselves because of the inclusion of a specific culture and the racialized styles of animated characters. There may be some sort of “leftover” or residue that occurs from the signification between human subjects and animated subjects in part because the areas for identification are so subtle between the cartoon and the human. These areas of identification could be something seemingly minor such as cartoons being immersed in a similar culture. Animated cartoons leave the residue of difference because they are primarily symbolically recognized. Because these texts are animated, there is usually little confusion about what is “real life” and that animation draws attention to itself as something that is “created.” This attention to the creation of animation is the residue that is what I am interested in exploring as well as the way these texts reach certain audiences, and how specific audiences can engage with these cultural stories and characters.

In the following chapters of this thesis, to better contextualize the relationship of the subject to the cartoon, I’ll provide a brief overview of production and plotlines among the stories *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Spirited Away*, and *Bao*. These texts present the immigrant experience from angles that range from nationality to family dynamics. I will be focusing on these stories since I feel they best re-present the psychological adaptation that is inherent in Asian-American immigrants and how individual characters in these texts best cooperate with the

psychological aspects of immigration while simultaneously dealing with the loss of their original “ethnic” identity.

The first narrative I have chosen is *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008) from Nickelodeon Animation Studios, written by Aaron Ehasz, and co-created by Micheal Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (hereafter referred to as *ATLA*), begins in a world where human societies consist of four nations named after the classic elements: The Fire Nation, The Earth Kingdom, The Water Tribes, and The Air Nomads. Certain people have the telekinetic ability to “bend” the elements, meaning they can manipulate and control these elements (mirroring techniques founded in Chinese Martial Arts) according to their corresponding nation. In the pilot episode, twelve-year-old Aang, who had been predestined to become the Avatar, had been frozen in ice by way of suspended animation. The Avatar is supposed to bring balance to the world as a Global Peacekeeper of sorts in relation to Eastern philosophies. In this television series, the Fire Nation has waged war on the remaining nations, declaring worldwide globalization and consumption of culture under the command of Fire Lord Ozai. Prince Zuko, who is the main antagonist in the first season, and the main focus in this section of this project, has been banished from the Fire Nation and seeks to capture the Avatar thereby restoring his honor and gaining acceptance back into the Fire Nation but perhaps most importantly, gaining favor in his father’s eyes.

*Spirited Away* (Japan 2001), written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki and animated by Studio Ghibli will also be included as another example from a child’s perspective of immigration. This film was adopted by Pixar animator John Lasseter, who convinced Walt Disney Pictures to buy the film’s North American distribution rights. *Spirited Away* follows ten-year-old female protagonist and secondary focus of this thesis, Chihiro Ogino, as she moves

to a new place when her father decides to take a shortcut through the woods. The detour reveals an abandoned amusement park by a riverbed that the family explores despite Chihiro's protests. In this park, the parents find an empty restaurant and partake in a gluttonous feast while Chihiro wanders around. She stumbles across a large bathhouse and meets a young boy named Haku who advises her to cross the riverbed before sunset, otherwise risking being trapped in a spirit realm. Chihiro returns to her parents only to find that they have transformed into pigs and she is unable to cross the river which is now flooded. Haku finds Chihiro and advises her to ask for work in this spirit realm. Chihiro comes across the character Yubaba who gives Chihiro a contract to work. Upon this agreement, Yubaba takes away the second 'kanji' (Japanese writing character) of her name, leaving her with the name 'Sen.' Haku gives her a goodbye card that she had been carrying labeled with her own name (Chihiro) and Sen realizes she had already forgotten her real name. Haku warns Sen that Yubaba controls people by taking their names, and that if she forgets her name completely, she will be stuck in the spirit world. The rest of the film focuses on the capitalist control that Yubaba has on this realm and how Sen can save her parents.

Finally, the short film *Bao* (2018) will serve as the concluding piece of this analysis. *Bao* is an American animated short film, written and directed by Domee Shi, produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released in 2018. *Bao* focuses on an unnamed Chinese Canadian woman who is cooking a Chinese meal of steamed yeast-leavened buns, also known as baozi, for herself and her presumed husband. In the short film, one of these buns comes alive and she raises the bun as a child, feeding and caring for it and the bun visually expresses enjoyment from her care. The "male" bun eventually wishes for more independence and the mother becomes overprotective, denying this independence which creates conflict between the two. The bun eventually alienates itself from the mother as it 'grows up' sprouting facial hair and becoming

plumper. The bun, at this point, had been going out, brings back a partner, and packs a tiny suitcase with the intent of leaving the mother's household. The mother tries to stop the bun from leaving but as tensions rise, the mother eats the bun and cries, realizing what she had done. As the mother lies in bed, distraught, the real son steps into the room, revealing that the previous scenes were an allegorical dream. They reconcile and the son and his fiancée join in making the baozis together.

Tracing some of the areas of studio merging, buy outs, and distribution is important to mention here since most of these examples fall under the historical illustration of animation by Walt Disney Studios with the exception of Nickelodeon. I will touch on aspects of this throughout the chapter on *Spirited Away*. The evolution of the Asian-American experience as illustrated in this animated television show and animated films, emphasizes and also transforms the socio-cultural and historical aspects in all stages of production but for the sake of brevity within this project, I will focus on the narrative of these stories and the interactions and developments between animator and animated (Cartoon Creations), as well as the identification with these cartoon creations from the perspective of the living audience.

Together, this TV series and these films uniquely and complexly illustrate the psychoanalytic concepts of melancholia, loss, and trauma, all from the perspective of the racialized subject since these characters were created with the intention of having Eastern origins. Melancholia is defined in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" essay as a loss that is recognized in the individual and a loss that cannot so easily be identified (245). This concept is crucial to the relationship that audience members develop with animated films or animated characters because of the symbolic identification that can occur; the individual has their loss revealed to them in a form of substitution. Ultimately, it's unsatisfactory though. This loss is

further elaborated on by David Eng and Shinhee Han in *Racial Melancholia*, *Racial Dissociation*, where it is associated with immigration and displacement for the racialized individual. In addition to this, racial trauma becomes a significant experience for the displaced individual. In other words, this trauma becomes a type of identification that declares a difference for that individual. This becomes a wound that may not be healed completely, which will be explored in all of the chapters of this project but most prominently in the chapter dealing with *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

This research will pay close attention to the intersections of psychoanalytic theories of loss. This thesis will consider the spectrum of loss in the way that presents loss dealing with terms such as trauma, mourning, and melancholia all within the scope of racial identification and the immigrant experience. The relationships between characters in these films will be explored through the medium of animation with concentration being paid to the culture of Asian-Americans and the representation that occurs through the construction of animated films. Disney, and by extension, Pixar studios, seem to have brought animated films into the spotlight in the U.S. These films could be seen as primarily enforcing westernized, often Eurocentric, ideology, so the rise of Asian-American animation sheds new light on the creation and production of animation films. Additionally, animated films recently have contributed to how cultural stories are being told. Animated films therefore are able to work with the accuracy of cultural re-presentation and identification. I will specifically be dealing with how these stories accurately and portray the psychological aspects of the Asian-American subject and immigration.

One of the most challenging aspects of immigration comes from one's ability to assimilate into a new place while being able to cope with the loss of (part of) oneself. *ATLA* deals with Eastern philosophies and cultures. The show also adopts martial arts as mechanisms for

constructing a narrative focused on colonialism and immigration, as is the case with Zuko who seeks to restore a loss. *Spirited Away* also deals with the (perhaps) unconscious immigration and melancholic process in the case of Chihiro as she is assigned a new name, while trying to hold onto her original name in a new world concerned with capitalist ideology. *Bao* details the adult perspective of dealing with grief through metaphor. *Bao* portrays the loss of the child and the restoration, and frustration, that comes with the attempted process of recovery. In other words, this narrative attempts to trace a significant portion of the Asian-American immigration experience ranging from attempted assimilation to psychological coping mechanisms dealing with melancholia. The animated medium then serves as a more unique way to think about identification while these cartoon characters serve as a bridge between audience viewers and subject-creators that have simultaneously dealt with cultural loss of identity. The takeaway here might be that the process of immigration is inherently situated in the identification of loss. The difficulty here is navigating the loss, that is, psychologically working through the effects of loss in an attempt to restore the empty space to a place of equilibrium.

Cultural stories and characters are often presented on screen in both television and film but the presentation of these stories fails to capture the depth of a culture. Through a significant part of Lacan's topology, (the mobius strip), I will argue that there is an erasure that happens particularly on the part of identification when stories that belong to a certain marginalized group become adapted by groups that may not fully understand the implications of erasure. This is most prominently mentioned in the chapter dealing with Zuko in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Furthermore, with respect to identity in this project, in *Lacan and Race*, Jennifer Friedlander writes, "The lack, which racial identity both marks and attempts to cover, also creates ripe conditions for stereotypes to seize hold" (111). In this way, there are multiple levels of



psychological relationships that are explored within this project. To best illustrate these conditions, this thesis will consider an analysis of episodes from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki and Pixar's short film, *Bao*, as some primary examples of Asian racial identification through Lacanian insights that can reveal the complicated psychic work that occurs.

## CHAPTER ONE

(Re)Claiming Loss: Displacement and Identity in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

“My God, my God, whose performance am I watching? How many people am I? Who am I? What is this space between myself and myself?” - Fernando Pessoa, from *The Book of Disquiet*

*Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA)*, an animated television show produced by Nickelodeon Studios premiered in 2005 to popular and critical acclaim. *ATLA* showcased and foregrounded what appeared to be Asian representations, although the creators only referenced the characters being influenced by Asian culture. Nickelodeon executive, John Hardman, spoke in a 1997 interview with Vicki Mayer and Ellen Seiter about the network’s stance on race in television programming which primarily focused on Black and Latinx representation in children’s media that, “the Asian kids are not as concerned about representation as the other groups. They accept that Asians aren’t represented and when they are, it’s often stereotypical” (Banet-Weiser 162). Even though Asianness isn’t explicitly named in *ATLA*, through the show’s worldmaking, density of cultural and visual allusions, these characters may be coded as non-white. Head writer for *ATLA*, Aaron Ehasz, says that “[We] want to be inspired without appropriating. [We] don’t want to accidentally say something about a culture. For example, early on, a lot of designs for the Fire Nation were inspired by designs from Japan,” which is obviously a problem as designing a bad “Japanese inspired” nation projected a poor message about Japanese culture. So, the writers and designers went on to broadly design the cartoon’s universe and the character’s cultures. Interestingly enough, Xine Yao, professor of English at the

University College London, writes about the effects of Asian traits in *ATLA*, stating that “as of late 2021, a Facebook page *Subtle Asian Traits* has had 1.9 billion users from Asia and the Asian Diaspora which is evidence of the show’s ‘perceived Asianness’ and how it resonates with fans and viewers” (480). While this isn’t a Facebook page specifically dedicated to *ATLA*, much of the page content is created referring to the show with memes that sustain positive attention from the Asian diaspora. It seems that the influence that *ATLA* has on the Asian audience is deeply grounded in Asian cultures.

The resonance from the audience is telling in that these viewers identify with *ATLA*’s characters through the style of the animated characters in combination with the deeply immersive culture that has found its roots in Asianness. In this chapter, I’ll be doing a close analysis of the character, Prince Zuko, because I think he is an optimal example of a character who experiences *National Melancholia* which is a concept that would be recognized by Asian viewers since Zuko shares similar traits and experiences as he becomes part of a diaspora. Moreover, I’ll explore the way that Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation, as a character coded by Asianness contributes to the psychoanalytic signification and identification process as experienced by viewers and how this identification process matters to the Asian immigrant in terms of being able to reclaim their loss (i.e. the loss of their culture and identity) and ultimately recover from this by naming their loss and attempting to assimilate into their newfound environment.

The character of Zuko is widely popular in *ATLA* because of his challenges and redemptions throughout the series. Prince Zuko is introduced to the audience in the first episode of *ATLA* as a banished prince on the search for the Avatar; the chosen one who must bring an end to The Hundred Year War started by the Fire Nation. The Hundred Year War has been the Fire Nation’s attempt to colonize the surrounding nations of Water, Earth, and Air. A large scar is

seen covering one side of Zuko's face, which is later explained to be the mark of banishment from his father after verbally "disrespecting" him in a military strategy meeting. This banishment exacts a heavy toll for Zuko; aside from the fact that he is a teenager (about sixteen years old), he is high strung, anxious, and hateful towards most everyone around him. Zuko eventually faces shame as he recognizes his participation in imperialist violence and cuts ties with his own family. Zuko travels with his Uncle Iroh, an ex-general who also is a father figure to Zuko. Iroh is betrayed by Zuko towards the end of the season two finale.

In addition to the artistic influences that have gone into the aesthetic animation of *ATLA*, the voice actors also add to the Asian influences surrounding the characters as well. Zuko is voiced by Dante Basco, a prominent Filipino actor while Iroh is voiced by Makoto "Mako" Iwamatsu, a founding member of the East-West Players, the first Asian American Theater organization. In addition to the voice actors, the animation for the show was outsourced to South Korea and the Korean animators were given the time and freedom "to add details to scenes and to follow the impression of the emotion in recorded dialogue rather than just the voice actors' mouths" (Yao 482). A documentary titled *Behind the Scenes, Avatar: The Last Airbender Book 1: Water* (Nickelodeon, 2005), led to many of the Korean artists "infusing their own points of view into the details of action and aesthetics... Animation director Jeong Yoon commented, 'it almost felt as if we were the actors doing all the action'" (482). I think that the voice acting adds to the Asian cultural influence because of the partly accented Asian voices throughout the series. The voice acting with the Korean aesthetics put into *ATLA* further contribute to the coding of these characters by blending the line between a cartoon fantasy and reality.

Growing attention from Asian audiences and involvement of Asian voice actors and the finer details of the animation by Korean artists also emphasizes identity signification. *ATLA* is

not only a cartoon fantasy. Psychoanalytic fantasy also comes into play through viewing. Through the process of identification and asks the question of desire. In other words, what does one desire when viewing an animated film? Throughout this thesis, I will be using Slavoj Žižek's emphasis on the signification process of identification outlined in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. The signification process may have been previously outlined with the production of *ATLA* with Nickelodeon's stance on racial representation and the construction of Asian coded animation series. In Žižek's chapter "Che Vuoi?", he elaborates on the Lacanian concept of the *point de capiton*, or the "quilting point" which fixes "floating" signifiers in order to stop metonymic sliding. The ideological space consists of non-tied elements "whose identity is 'open,' overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements — that is, their 'literal' signification depends on their metaphorical surplus-signification" (95). Put simply, the *point de capiton* unifies the signifying field of the signified insofar as the signifier is articulated. This quilting point then stitches together the difference of the signifiers, or perhaps, closes the signifiers "open identity" thereby constituting a predictable chain of identification qua quilted difference. "Quilted" might also be understood through Bruce Fink's translation of *Écrits* as "a button tie — the diachronic function of this button tie can be found in a sentence, insofar as a sentence closes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction constituted by the other terms and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect" (682). So, in this way, we might connect the subject's experience as being constantly resignified but only through the means of interpreting the signification retroactively. Let us take a flashback from *ATLA* as an example of retroactive signification as a quilting point for the subject.

Episode 12 of the first season of *ATLA*, “The Storm,” might reveal the *point de capiton* for Zuko through flashbacks. By voicing opposition (“You can’t do that!”) to the commands of the Fire Lord’s army sacrificing inexperienced soldiers on the front lines to take a portion of the Earth nation, Zuko simultaneously unites himself with the well-being of the Fire Nation soldiers, which in turn goes against the Fire Nation’s ideology of domination by any means necessary, even betraying its own citizens. Uncle Iroh had forewarned him against speaking out and uttered that there would be “dire consequences” to Zuko’s actions. Because we are first introduced to Zuko as an angsty young man on the search for the Avatar as a means of regaining his honor, the audience has yet to experience the cause of his anger and the motivations for these emotions. The dire consequences that result from speaking out in the War Room, enforce the Fire Nation duel known as “Agni Kai — The Fire Nation practice of Agni Kai (or ‘fire duel’) has long been used to solve conflicts. Anyone challenged to an Agni Kai must accept or be branded as a weakling. On the other hand, anyone who steps into the Agni Kai chamber knows it could be his or her last fight. These duels have claimed the lives of many Firebenders, and they’ve been even more unforgiving to people who have shown mercy on their opponents” (archived and taken from The Lost Lore of Avatar Aang). This problem-solving exercise was held in a special chamber as a public event. Iroh explains in this flashback that “Zuko had misunderstood. When he turned to face his opponent, he was surprised to see it was not the general. Zuko had spoken against the general’s plan, but by doing so in the Fire Lord’s War Room, it was the Fire Lord whom he had disrespected. Zuko would have to duel his own father.”



Fig. 1. Zuko begging for his father, the Fire Lords', forgiveness in S1:E12 "The Storm"

The Fire Lord asks Zuko to rise and fight, declaring that "[He] will learn respect and suffering will be [his] teacher." Uncle Iroh goes on to explain that by choosing not to fight, Zuko had shown "shameful weakness" and as a result was banished from the Fire Nation. Zuko's loss from the duel leaves him with a large scar that covers about half his face (which I'll return to in a moment.) Now, connecting what we know about the quilting point, it is understood that through Zuko's outspokenness, he had differentiated himself from his father, and by extension, the Fire Nation's ideology. This moment becomes the stitch for Zuko that solidifies his position against the Fire Nation, branded, figuratively and physically, as "dishonored." Prior to the Agni Kai with his father, it might be understood that Zuko's trajectory to the Fire Nation throne might have been straight forward as the heir, but since he had spoken out against his father, his actions quilted him to a future of reclaiming that which was lost. The connection here is for those that have experienced the loss of a future, that is, the viewers who might be able to identify the process of loss through their inherent immigrant experience. The difference for viewers is that their immigrant experiences may not have resulted in physical abuse from their family members.

Some immigrant viewers may not have even gathered the courage to speak out against their family members or those of the same culture but still arrive at a psychological loss in the process of immigration. Because Zuko is coded as an Asian individual, the dishonoring and supposed strong family loyalty may invite viewers to identify parts of themselves through Zuko's experience. It is important to mention the quilting point for both Zuko and viewers because of the signification that becomes reliant upon the experience of loss. In other words, there is an immigrant experience that perhaps enforces only one way of interpretation through retroactivity. One can only work through the consequences in a single way rather than be opened to other chances of recovery. Because the show isn't drawing from any one particular Asian culture, this allows its viewers to better recognize the common themes across these cultures thereby amplifying similarities through difference.

### Animating Sounds of Silence

Zuko's dishonorable actions, by way of speaking out, are closely linked with Asian cultures of listening, which can be taken as another sign of the coded Asianness within *ATLA*. Although *ATLA* doesn't specifically name which Eastern influences are used within the show, contextually, we can take a broader stance on these Asian cultural influences, especially regarding silence. In "A Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and American Views about Silence and Debate", Gu Xiao-Le, an active researcher from the Harbin Institute of Technology in English for Academic Purposes and English as a Second Language writes that "... silence holds a strong contextual meaning, such as showing obedience to senior people, or being a sign of respect for the wisdom and expertise of others, or disagreement while avoiding direct confrontation, or a time interval for sorting out ideas, depending on the context of the time" (58). Since Asian cultures show



loyalty through silence, this becomes important because Iroh tells Zuko to not speak during the meeting. We can draw cultural connections regarding the significance of silence in Asian cultures. Xiao-Le focuses her article on the Chinese culture of listening and speaking and how respect plays a significant role in hierarchical communities. Xiao-Le goes on to write about “Harmony vs Confrontation —Few people would like to speak out their opinions voluntarily. Even if they do, their participation is never argumentative. They never openly expressed disagreement with others because it is considered to be aimed at the individual, thus [damaging] the long-nourished and established harmonious *guanxi* (i.e. social relationship), which has a very important position in Chinese society” (58). Harmony is one of the main focuses in the series, with the opening voice of Katara narrating in the title credits, “Long ago, the Four Nations lived together in harmony. Then, everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked.” So, when we think about harmony being a determining factor for Zuko, we should think of this as him staying silent in the important meeting illustrating harmony.

Speaking out puts Zuko in a confrontational position, but confrontation is seen in the West to resolve issues. Zuko’s behavior resists the national behavior that is associated with the Fire Nation. If we take the Fire Nation as an extension of Asian culture with harmony being the preference, I argue that Zuko adopts a more Americanized conflict-based behavior. Xiao-Le describes the dynamic of listening and speaking in Chinese culture:

Contrary to the Chinese preference for harmony, Americans will choose confrontation, i.e., honestly expressing [their] own ideas, defending [their] own opinions, and openly confronting opposing ideas. To them, this is a better way to solve problems than avoiding conflicts. This means facing the facts, meeting the problem head on. Consistent with

these tendencies, it is also desirable to face people directly, to debate with them, and to confront them. (59)

Confrontation here is taken as an example of Asian immigration with both East and West cultural practices illustrated by Zuko. Those who have the tendencies to follow the Eastern tradition of staying silent and allowing the person in charge to speak will recognize that Zuko had disrespected his father publicly and will anticipate the consequences of his actions. Zuko's outburst aligns him with people that recognize Western traditions of openly speaking about a problem. Zuko walks the cultural line that many Asian immigrants face regarding the traditional practice of silence. The reason that Zuko's balance between cultures matters is that it reflects much of the Asian-American immigrant experience which is to say that many immigrants have to choose which side of the cultural line to stand on. In this way, there is almost always a certain loss that occurs for that person.

Not only this, but "the experience of immigration itself is based on a structure of mourning. When one leaves one's country of origin – voluntarily or involuntarily – one must mourn a host of losses both concrete and abstract. These include homeland, family, language, identity, property, [and] status in community" (Han and Eng 48). While this definition aligns with the concept of mourning, Zuko's psychic struggle is not so easily identifiable within him and the Asian diasporic viewer. While Han and Eng are able to identify the objects that are lost to immigrants, Zuko is not able to locate the true objects that he has lost. He mistakes the object of honor as something he needs to recover, however the desire for recovery is much more intrinsic and personal for him. In other words, he has to work through an inarticulable loss, a stressful and challenging process, so he can recover that lost part of himself.

The elements that Han and Eng provide are well within consciousness for Zuko because Zuko must identify and connect more deeply situated psychic losses that are rendered inarticulate or melancholic, much like the classroom and clinical examples that Han and Eng provide. In this way, Zuko exemplifies a part of the immigrant experience but more specifically, the diasporic position of someone from Asia coming to the United States because of the traditional Eastern values that are aligned with the Fire Nation. This “Westernization” manifests itself through the outburst in the War Room. Clearly, not all Asian-American immigrants will identify with Zuko’s specific experiences, but they will resonate with him. The Asian popularity for the character is evident through *Subtle Asian Traits* therefore suggesting that symbolic identification can happen. Resonance, as a way of attending to identification, might be thought of as an experience that “sticks” with us, something that suggests a deeper connection although not initially clear. For example, the outburst in the War Room suggests what many Asian Americans believe to be a form of disrespect as evidenced by Xiao-Le and her description of Chinese cultural practices of listening and speaking.

Zuko’s connections to the Asian cultural practices of silence should also be combined with the concept of melancholia since the melancholic subject attempts to articulate an unknown loss. Eng and Han draw from Judith Butler in the *Psychic Life of Power* in which Butler writes, “The melancholic would have *said something*, if he [sic] could but did not, and now believes in the sustaining power of the voice. Vainly, the melancholic now says what he would have said, addressed only to himself, as one who is already split off from himself, but whose power depends upon this self-forfeiture” (52, in *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation*; 182, in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, emphasis in original). Precisely, this is a psychoanalytic turn that Zuko faces as he internalizes the trauma that he has faced at the hands of

his nation. Zuko knows that he has lost his “national honor” — his perceived loyalty to the Fire Nation — but once realizing the imperialism that occurs through the Fire Nation’s domination, he forfeits his national identity, and reclaims himself, for himself rather than being influenced by Fire Nation Ideology.

### “Father, You’re Burning Me”: Wearing Traits of Trauma

Let us consider for a moment another defining trait (aside from his voice) that Zuko has now as a result of the verbal disrespect against his father. Zuko’s scar, designed as a large red patch over one of his eyes, cannot be removed. He is branded, permanently marked, and reminded of the Agni Kai event. By extension, this scar is a signifier for the moment which quilts him against the Fire nation. This scar can be thought of as “pure difference.” Lacan describes pure difference by the term “Unary Trait,” a form that supports symbolic difference. “[The unary] is this term that the logicians use when it is a question of defining identity by the elimination of qualitative differences by reducing them as one might say to a simplified schema: this is supposed to be the mainspring of this recognition characteristic of our apprehension of what the support of the signifier is, the letter” (33), or scar. Because of Zukos’ physical mark, he can be recognized as having suffered at the literal hand of the Fire Nation. This mark, trait, scar, (re)presents a change to his identity. Not only has Zuko gained a permanent change, but he also has a physical representation of his loss of honor to his nation. In the second season, Zuko tells Katara of the Water Tribe that he is starting to accept that he won't be rid of the scar, telling her, "I used to think this scar marked me - the mark of the banished prince, cursed to chase the Avatar forever. But lately, I've realized I'm free to determine my own destiny, even if I'll never be free of my mark." Although a mark of difference, this reflection that Zuko has is the beginning of his own

unstitching from his past and a realization that he does not have to follow the path of generational trauma that is inflicted by the Fire Nation.

Trauma in this context is not so easily escapable for Zuko and would benefit from the psychoanalytic exploration that Cathy Caruth has done on trauma which regards the experience of repetition as a means for interpreting traumatic encounters. Drawing from the Agni Kai event, Zuko emerges traumatized, not only in “the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury, and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out. A voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*” (Caruth 2). Zuko attempts to justify his scar to Katara but fails to articulate the actual event in which it happened; instead, he focuses on the future. His voice, the articulation of the trauma only occurs because of the trauma itself, of course. Caruth goes on to write, “the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” but in Zuko’s case, the scar is both a physical sign for and of psychic trauma that he repetitively experiences. Further, Caruth writes, “the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world — is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon [and] too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, and repeatedly” (4). What Caruth writes about is an experience that is too complex to work through in the moment that one experiences. This event can be a physical one and/or a psychological one. The Agni Kai event resulted in the banishment of Zuko and for a while, throughout the series, he thought he knew what he could do to reclaim his honor by capturing the Avatar. But he had not known that this event would result in another reclamation, haunted by the event, which drove him unconsciously. The obvious loss of national honor that he traumatically experiences reveals an identity separate from national identity that he has to constantly (re)construct.

Season 2, Episode 16, “Lake Laogai” provides a deeper glimpse of the internal struggle that Zuko faces, choosing between his nation and himself. The previous paragraph offers a position that allows for trauma to be an identification tool by way of repetition. To be clear, trauma itself is not a process of individual identification but serves as a stepping point for those that seek to work through the identification process. Trauma has the potential to become a mechanism for people to use to work through a particularly inarticulable experience. Because of a person’s choice to use trauma as a means of working through identification, the repetition of trauma allows an opportunity for intercession. The repeated choice for Zuko becomes opportunities for him to draw the line between what he wants and who he is, which might be (and usually is) two different people. The episode follows Zuko and his uncle once again on the search for the Avatar in the Earth Kingdom city of Ba Sing Se. After finding the Avatar’s captured “sky bison” (a large bison that can fly) chained up, Uncle Iroh confronts Zuko with a choice to set the bison free or to keep the bison hostage and lure the Avatar. Here, in this conversation with his uncle, Zuko has to make a difficult decision: do the right thing or attempt to regain his honor by trying to capture the Avatar once again. “I know my own destiny,” Zuko says — his own destiny to go back home to the Fire Nation, back home to his father. But Iroh counters, “Is it your *own* destiny? Or is it a destiny someone else has tried to force on you?... It’s time for you to look inward and begin asking yourself the Big Questions: Who are you? And what do *you* want?” Frustrated, Zuko screams as if in pain from hearing his uncle’s perspective. Arguably, this reopens Zuko’s traumatic psychic wound because of the stress that is placed on him from his uncle which reflects the pressure that was experienced by his father in the Agni Kai. This builds on the traumatic experience of the subject and forces an inward reflection for Zuko.

The suggestion to reflect, to go back to the place and event where he was branded, rises to consciousness again. Zuko voiced his opinion in the Fire Lord's war room, genuinely expressing what it is that he wants; Zuko wanted the Fire Nation army to keep their soldiers safe and showed vulnerability for his nation and its citizens. Timothy Richardson in *Contingency, Immanence, and the Subject of Rhetoric* writes about traumatic events building from Caruth and the essence of revealing the missing signifier. Richardson writes, "...the traumatic event (that which cannot be spoken) is imminently productive of words; since one can never quite 'say' the event, one is left with always *trying* to say it" (108). In this case, Zuko is forced to face the fact that he is missing himself, who he really is, and what choices he wants to make according to his own destiny. Because "saying" is subjective, Zuko's angry exclamation (and not articulation) should be noted as possibly being a psychic extension of returning to the Agni Kai event. This is traumatic repetition for Zuko and it's this repetition that continually animates him. His uncle asks him to look inward and really determine who Zuko is, identifying parts of himself that he had not known were there. Eventually Zuko does the right thing and sets the bison free.

Being so deeply situated in a psychological struggle, Zuko's actions don't come without consequences. Namely, after the event with the bison, he suffers from what I believe to be symptoms from doing something "against his nature." Zuko then might be thought of as having *really* lost the object cause of desire for him (his honor) by intentionally making the choice to set Aang bison free. Ellie Ragland explains this lost object cause of desire from Lacan: "When the object of value — the object *a* — is lost, some part of its identificatory traits remain to attach unconscious remembrance to conscious memory, making of primordial repression a knowledge that functions by...unary traits...that can be isolated in language, images, affects, and symptoms" (84). Here, we see the doubling of signification. The unary trait is established as a

signifier for Zuko, previously mentioned that the traumatic events and the result of his scar signifies dishonor against the Fire Nation. For the audience, the meaning that is attached to Zuko's physical scar is his personal psychological trauma as well. But as Zuko is faced with the choice to set the Avatar's bison free, he knows that he must make a different choice and attempt to pursue something against his nature.

### Shaping National Melancholia

I take the following episode as an example of Zuko's symptoms where he becomes disoriented and faints after returning to Ba Sing Se with his uncle in order to illustrate the effects of melancholia and the stressful process of identification. Zuko is tired, coughing, and having fever dreams where his psychological struggle becomes illustrated even further. Uncle Iroh goes on to explain to Zuko that "this is not a natural sickness...your critical decision, what you did...was in such conflict with your image of yourself that you are now at war within your own mind and body... you're going through a metamorphosis, nephew." Going through a metamorphosis might be one way to put it, but I want to turn back to Ragland in her explanation of unary traits that possibly reveals a bit more about Zuko's psychological journey. She writes, "Lacan moves dynamically from the substitution of one thing for another in metaphor by way of equivalence relations, to follow the train of its engagement with metonymy, which might be described as the one-dimensional trait left over from the experience of having and losing...Lacan's preferred form is the Möbius strip, shaped like a figure 8" (110). Möbius strip surfaces bring its outside surface and continue it inside, at the twist of its axis, thus enabling us to attribute a dynamic movement to the drives which includes the object-cause-of-desire in the function of meaning making.





Fig. 2. Image of the Möbius Strip.

Zuko might unconsciously be substituting one desire for another, but this has yet to be realized for him. I wanted to bring attention to the fact that he still experiences the symptoms of his action and how this configures with Iroh's statement of looking inward. "In melancholia," Han and Eng write, "the subject's turning from outside (intersubjective) to inside (intrapsychic) threatens to render social history invisible" (51). This reflection of oneself takes the form of the möbius strip, as Zuko experiences the retroactive identification of his desires, he is forced to inwardly perceive himself; his mask (the regaining of his honor, his nationalism) now falls away to be lost and slightly revealing more of his true self. Indeed, this substitution is put in motion by Zuko's Agni Kai experience. He follows the signification down to a choice, one that follows his traditional habits, or one that goes against the things that he had convinced himself to believe.

Although he sets the bison free, ruining his chances at capturing the avatar, in the Season 2 finale, he makes the choice to turn his back on his uncle, betraying him by turning him into the Fire Nation prison. Since Iroh and Zuko had been banished, Zuko's sister, Azula, had been chasing them down trying to bring them back to the Fire Nation as captives. Zuko relinquishes his alliance with Iroh and sides with Azula who takes Iroh as a prisoner. In the Season 2 finale, Azula shoots down the Avatar with lightning, a subset of firebending, thus rendering Aang incapacitated. Aang and his friends ultimately escape but the Fire Nation thinks that he is dead.

Azula and Zuko return to the Fire Nation and Zuko realizes he is finally getting what he wants by returning home and gaining back his honor. Azula lies to the Fire Lord stating that Zuko was the one who killed the Avatar and Zuko takes his place at the right hand of the Fire Lord's throne. Zuko, over time, rejects his place in the Fire Nation and eventually renounces his title.

Season 3, Episode 5, "The Beach" provides even more insight on Zuko's mindset as he wrestles with returning home and the profound loss that he has to work through. This episode might be thought of as a therapy session for Zuko now that he has returned home but decides that he doesn't belong there anymore. Zuko is surrounded by his sister Azula, and other friends when he explains that "For so long, I thought that if my dad accepted me, I'd be happy. I'm back home now. My dad talks to me. He even thinks I'm a hero. Everything should be perfect right? I should be happy now but I'm not. I'm angrier than ever and I don't know why." Azula chimes in, "There's a simple question you need to answer then: Who are you angry at?" Zuko replies, "No one... I'm just angry. Everyone... I don't know." The group that he is having this conversation with pressures him into identifying his source of anger, throwing out options: his dad, his uncle, his sister, his girlfriend. Zuko exclaims, "I'm angry at myself... because I'm confused. Because I'm not sure if I know the difference between right and wrong anymore." Here, the conversation warrants a return to the melancholic subject, Zuko, who finds himself successfully assimilated into his homeland, but with no satisfaction. Han and Eng write about the way melancholia manifests itself and the effects that come with the experience as delineated by Freud.

"...Depression often accompanying melancholia is extremely dangerous, characterized by the tendency to suicide. Here, we, [the authors] add, suicide may not merely be physical...it may also manifest in the physical erasure of one's identity — a self-imposed exile and exclusion" (38). Zuko's psychic struggle and attempt to reorient himself into the Fire Nation mirrors Eng

and Han's comments. Zuko may not show traditional signs of depression, but "the anger that [he] feels toward the loved object is internalized as depression and anger toward the self" (52). The loved object here being Zuko's identity, which not only was erased, but has been overwritten by his *point de capiton* and unary trait of his scar. He finds himself once again at the crossroads of nationalism and individualism struggling to substitute one desire for another.

Han and Eng continue to write on the subject of "National Melancholia," stating that, "for Asian Americans and other people of color, suspended assimilation into mainstream culture may involve not only debilitating personal consequences; ultimately, it also constitutes the foundation for a type of national melancholia, a collective national haunting, with destructive effects" (38). As Zuko continues to live in the Fire Nation, he constantly is searching for a way to feel like he belongs. He doubts himself and his abilities to accept that he is the Fire Nation Prince. Zuko, angry at himself, feels grief for his uncle, haunted by his self-destructive choices.

At the root of Zuko's struggle with mourning and melancholia is the love for his nation; not for the imperialist nation that has incited war, but for the future of a nation that he wants to have, a nation that leads the way with peace and kindness. Growing up and learning about the Fire Nation, the historical explanation for the war was that "the Fire Nation was the greatest civilization in history and somehow the war was [their] way of sharing [their] greatness with the rest of the world." This love that was cruelly substituted by his father's wrath transformed him into an individual who thought that he could find another (external) source that could be exchanged for the lack. In *The Shell and The Kernel*, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok discuss "exchanging one's own identity for a fantasmic identification with the 'life' ... of an object of love, lost because of some metapsychological traumatism... The melancholic's complaints translate a fantasy...a fantasy that only serves to mask the real suffering, this one

unavowed, caused by a wound the subject does not know how to heal” (142). This unknowing of how to heal a wound is inherent in the immigrant process. It seems that there are individuals that come to a place not knowing the (cultural/social) laws surrounding them. There is always a need for mindful healing insofar as there is a gap of knowledge. Zuko’s journey is interesting in that he doesn’t heal from traumatic displacement, he comes to accept it, but it is never healed. If we take the unary trait of his scar marking his difference, he never gets rid of it, though he may have had an opportunity. Instead, he chooses to reconfigure his identity (with the help of his uncle) by trying to differentiate between his true self and his false self.

Throughout *ATLA*, Zuko’s substitutions are met with strife. Because Zuko is part of an imperialist nation, one that destabilizes other nations and forces people into immigrant/diasporic lives, he becomes a signifier of dissent in this way. Zuko refuses to align himself with a nation that he thought he loved only to have it be revealed after his banishment and return home that the Fire Nation is hated and feared. This is in line with the reality of a diaspora; Zuko had to let go of the idea of “home” and realize that there is no place where one is completely free. Throughout his journey hunting the Avatar, along with his psychic struggle and the desire to reclaim his honor, Zuko witnesses the effects of the Fire Nation’s war; he hides his identity and lives in fear, confronted with the lies that Fire Nation ideology told him. At the end of Zuko’s struggle, he realizes his own destiny and not one that was nationally transposed on him.

For many Asian American viewers of *ATLA*, Zuko illustrates the precarity of melancholia in real-life experiences regarding Asian immigration. In combination with the interruption in the War Room which demonstrates a violation of Asian culture, the physical traits signified as Unary marking him as a social Other, and his own National Melancholia, Zuko becomes a placeholder for those viewers who resonate with his character. Zuko’s story becomes symbolically

identifiable with Asian viewers because of the way *ATLA* has been coded as Asian; Zuko's experiences are deeply enmeshed, perhaps unconsciously, thereby allowing viewers to connect similar experiences with his. His return home constructs a narrative that is like that of immigrant assimilation — he goes beyond the Fire Nation, only to come back to his homeland as a stranger characterized by loss. Eng and Han perceive immigration and assimilation as intergenerational negotiation. Thus, the pressure to regain his honor stems from the urge for his father to accept him. This is “the intersubjective unfolding and outcome of the [melancholic] process that underwrites the various psychic investments and losses connected to the immigration experience” (Han and Eng 49). Unfolding in Zuko's example synthesizes the Asian viewing experience here, not only as a character construction/narrative but also through symbolic identification. The observant and reflective Asian viewer can align themselves with his melancholic experience, *investing* in Zuko's experience. Loss for both Zuko and the Viewer perpetuate symbolic identification through the world-building connections and character narrative allowing themselves (the viewer) to become permeated by the animation. Melancholia as an intrapsychic mechanism allows the viewer to identify themselves. *ATLA* is a vehicle for forging (or uncovering) their own identity and buffering cultural assimilation. Zuko's story and *ATLA* as a series describe a psychological transition to accepting identity and developing psychic and physical space in the world that should benefit those who struggle with their own cultural identity while also navigating the environments they are in. In this way, animated films are able to wrestle with complex questions regarding difference that gives viewers permission to invest in thoughtful and enjoyable responses to cultural and social experiences.

## CHAPTER TWO

Characters of Loss and Displacing Spirits in Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

I didn't know the cost of entering a song--was to lose your way back. So I entered. So I lost. I lost it all with my eyes wide open. — Ocean Vuong, “Threshold”

Melancholia reveals boundaries between psychic space and physical space by way of emphasizing loss. The lost object, seemingly irrecoverable, exists only as a shadow, marking the space where something once was. From the previous chapter's example, Zuko's melancholia allows him to recognize his position in the Fire Nation as well as his displacement after experiencing the loss of his honor. The experience of loss reveals the shifting space of belonging that desire operates from. The space of belonging for the subject might be interpreted as one's nation as in Zuko's case. But as Zuko outlines some of the physical navigations of melancholia, what does it mean for a subject to be transposed according to a history that is seemingly lost? Can a subject through language gain autonomy in a foreign land? Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki (2001) explores this question and the way culture becomes a mechanism for achieving identity in transition.

Initially titled in Japanese as *Chihiro to Sen No Kamikakushi*, this critically acclaimed animated film produced by Studio Ghibli brought a new perspective to the world of animation earning the Oscar for Best Animated Film at the 75<sup>th</sup> Annual Academy Awards ceremony. Kat Moon, author of Time Magazine's article titled “How *Spirited Away* Changed Animation Forever” writes, “The movie arrived at a time when animation was widely perceived as a genre solely for children, and when cultural differences often became barriers to the global distribution of animated works.” The intended audience, Moon includes as a quote from Miyazaki, was for small children, specifically “10-year-old girls who are in the first stage of adolescence.” The film

had successfully reached the intended audience as well as a larger audience that consisted of a diverse demographic of adults and film critics. There is something to be said about the success of *Spirited Away* reaching a wider audience both foreign and domestically. Miyazaki's storytelling and visuals surely stand out to those that aren't used to viewing Japanese animation. In addition to this, it may be the way that *Spirited Away* had been marketed as a playful children's film around the time of its release that speaks to the audiences' captivation.

The distribution process for *Spirited Away* yielded some complications because of the way Miyazaki's previous films were distributed. Studio Ghibli (known as Tokuma Shoten at the time) was hesitant to partner with Disney Studios for *Spirited Away* because of edit issues and final cuts initiated by other foreign distributors. Susana Polo writes that 22 minutes of the original film were cut in an attempt to make a more family-friendly action-adventure film. These cuts changed the way the main protagonist was perceived. Dr. Shiro Yoshioka, a lecturer in Japanese Studies at Newcastle explains the editing process done by Manson International on Miyazaki's 1984 film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*: "The assumption behind the editing was that American audiences wouldn't understand the storyline, because in the States and in many Western countries, the assumption was that animation was for children," Yoshioka explains. While a lot can be said about the politics surrounding (foreign) film distribution rights and (domestic) marketing, this chapter turns our attention to the craft of Japanese animation.

Since *ATLA* was coded and inspired by Asian cultures, *Spirited Away* demands cultural attention to distinct Japanese names and folklore, along with the intimate animation styles. This chapter focuses on the protagonist in *Spirited Away*, Chihiro Ogino, who while traveling with her parents to a new home, stumbles into a realm populated with spirits, with some spirits being more abstract than others. She finds the help of Haku, who advises her to seek work in The

Bathhouse. The boss of The Bathhouse, Yubaba, makes Chihiro sign a contract — taking away her name, and declaring that Chihiro will be known as Sen now. This is one of the influential scenes that will be explored here, the concept of (re)naming for the immigrant as melancholic. The immigrant desire to change one's name can come from one of two things, maybe even both: the desire to assimilate, or the desire to break from the past. Mary Chao's article "What's in a name? For Asian Immigrants, a chance to 'assimilate or vanish'" gives an example of the (re)naming process that provides some insight into Chihiro's name in *Spirited Away*. Chao (formally known as Ching Hwa) writes on the process of Anglicization of names which is "based on British or Anglo-American colonization." Chao writes, "in Hong Kong during British rule, [renaming] made it easier to fit in and earn a living within colonial spaces and jurisdictions. The tradition of changing names carried over as Asians migrated to the United States" drawing from Jack Tchen.

"Assimilate, or vanish," Hwa's title suggests. It's within this phrase that I apply the previously outlined terms of melancholia, trauma, and unary traits to Chihiro Ogino in *Spirited Away* because through Chihiro's journey, she experiences the loss of her name, arguably suggesting loss of her autonomy in the spirit world. She traumatically undergoes a repetition of tasks (experiences with Yubaba, the phantom "No-Face," and Haku) that allow her to explore a reclamation of identity. Within these tasks, she is constantly reminded that she is human and does not belong in this realm. Through *Spirited Away*, I'll argue that in addition to these features in which a melancholic subject develops, there is also a psychoanalytic effect on the viewer that calls for symbolic identification by the way that Chihiro must keep her original name as a tie to her history and eventually her emancipation. Chihiro's name becomes a vessel that is extended through the film to those that can identify with (re)naming. This immensely complex animated



film illustrates the melancholic subject in terms of (the loss of) language, and hauntological transitions in psychological/physical space.

### Naming Loss and Identifying Melancholy

In the opening sequence of *Spirited Away*, Chihiro is in transition. She and her family are traveling to a new place when they take a shortcut through the woods to get to their home. On this path, the family sees “shrines” and the mother indicates that “some people think little spirits live there.” Much to the dismay of Chihiro, her parents decide they want to get out of the car and explore a tunnel that eventually leads to an abandoned theme park. The theme park has a food court that the parents gorge from even though Chihiro states that they shouldn’t do that. Chihiro wanders around the theme park, eventually crossing a dried-up riverbed and stumbling across a bathhouse. Chihiro meets a young boy named Haku who advises her to cross the riverbed before sunset, otherwise risking being trapped in a spirit realm. Chihiro returns to her parents only to find that they have transformed into pigs, and she is unable to cross the river which is now flooded. Haku finds Chihiro as she is physically disappearing and advises her to ask for work in this spirit realm. Haku explains that Yubaba is a witch who steals people’s names and resides in the bathhouse which acts as the center for the spirit realm. Yubaba controls people by stealing their names. He goes on to say that if Chihiro forgets her name, she will be permanently stuck in the spirit realm. As Chihiro navigates the spirit world, she gets to Yubaba and after a little coaxing, signs a contract that allows her to work. Miyazaki writes, “To take a name away from a person is an attempt to keep them under perfect control” (17), and this is Yubaba’s tenet in the film. She states, “Oh, your name's Chihiro. What a pretty name. And it belongs to me now, from now on your name is Sen.”

The name in this context suggests a signifier of self, a representation of self. Because Yubaba takes a part of Chihiro's original name, we should think of this as Yubaba taking a portion of Chihiro's autonomy of self. For example, in the scene where Chihiro is signing Yubaba's contract, there is an illustration of Chihiro's written name being taken off the page with only a remaining (reminding?) character — the Japanese writing character being Sen.

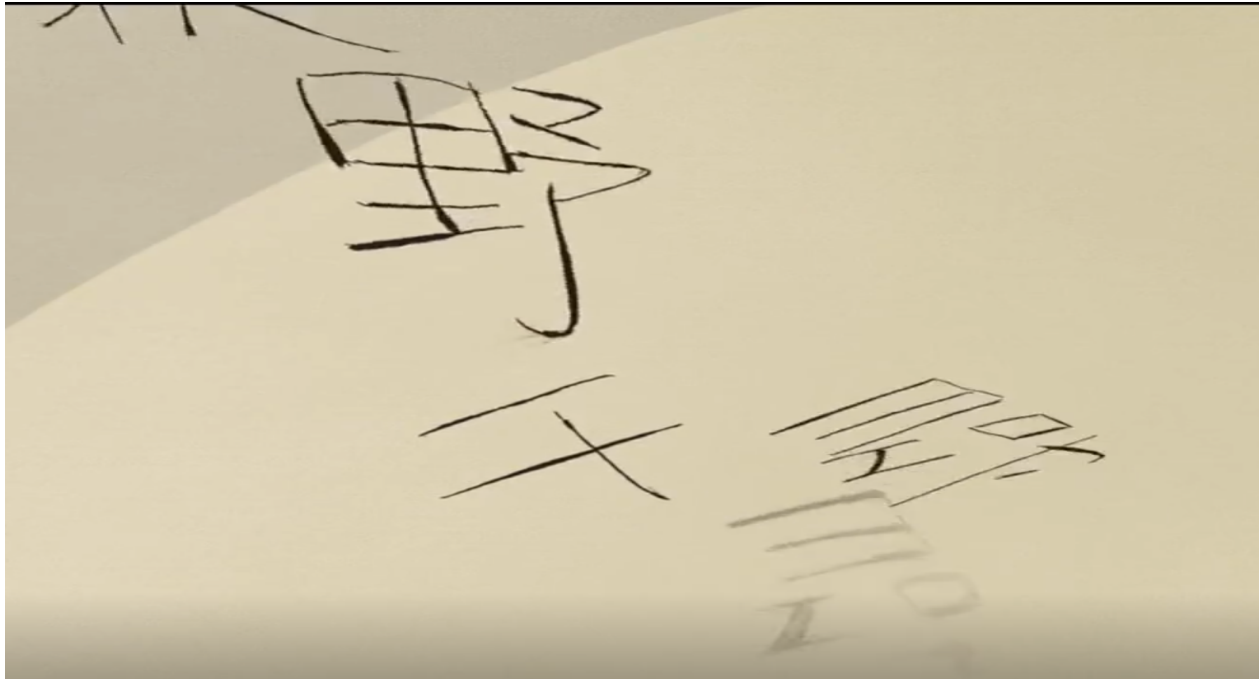


Figure 3. Illustration of “Chihiro” to “Sen”

Chihiro offers a substantive exploration of the question of identity when viewed through Phillip Bromberg's essay dealing with “the Multiplicity of Self and Decenteredness.” Bromberg asks questions in his essay dealing with identity and self. In other words, who do these people become as they transition into these spaces? What happens to familiar identity in a foreign space? The removal of self, or perhaps, the recognition of multiplicity indicates that which is prevalent in melancholy, a desire for recovery through unification *and* identification of self. Chihiro moves through the spirit realm by knowing she is different. She stands apart from the

normal inhabitants of the spirit world. In this way, unification is only an illusion as Bromberg suggests:

It is when this illusion of unity is traumatically threatened with unavoidable, precipitous disruption that it becomes [a] liability, because it is in jeopardy of being overwhelmed by input it cannot process symbolically and deal with as a state of conflict. When the illusion of unity is too dangerous to be maintained there is then a return to the simplicity of dissociation as a proactive, defensive response to the potential repetition of trauma. (4)

Chihiro's name is dissociated physically by Yubaba's taking of the characters. Dissociation might be used here as an extension of melancholy. I bring it up here in relation to identification. In that, through the process of identification for Chihiro, she must first dissociate from her original identity through a traumatic experience in order to fully realize herself. If we take the concept of the name as an extension of self, we actually see that by Chihiro's entrance into the spirit world she had already begun (physically) dissociating and a lack of autonomy already occurs. It seems to me that this is an indication that dissociation can be taken as a defensive response. The illusion of unification (in Chihiro's case, the uniting with her parents/return to home) is doubly revealed as an affect on the body first, then signified through Yubaba's taking of her name. This loss of selfhood for Chihiro indicates on the level of (transnational) viewership, the experiences that individuals undergo as they navigate foreign spaces.

I want to spend some time here exploring the importance of the *Japanese* name and the significance that characters have to an individual. It is within the concept of Japanese language that I suggest a connection with the unary trait that was established as a trait of pure difference from the scar that Zuko bears. Here, the unary trait is applied to Chihiro's (re)naming because as

Chihiro witnesses the erasure of her name, she is marked by the absence which leads to her reclaiming her name. “In Japanese inter-signifier subjects,” Kazushige Shingu writes, “Lacan developed the idea that the nature of the Japanese writing system itself, in which most characters (*Kanji*) can be read in *on-yomi* or *kun-yomi* [representing a Japanese word or a Chinese word] means that the Japanese subject has a fundamentally different relationship to the signifier” (224, parenthesis mine). Defining *Kanji* is what I think is most important at this time because of the relation to the unary trait as defined in the previous chapter but especially regarding Yubaba's taking of Chihiro's name which becomes part of the identification process. Shingu goes on to write, “The Japanese *Kanji* meaning ‘character’ or ‘letter’ is composed of two parts: the upper part denotes the roof of a house and the lower part a child, as if this character as a whole is illustrating a childbirth in the family. This birth, indicated by the character, is the birth of the subject of language” (228). In this way, Lacan believed that the Japanese subject was not only divided by language but also that in Japanese, “the repressed can find its lodging in the letter. Because the repressed more freely expresses itself...the repressed is ‘written’ and can be easily ‘read’” (224). So, when Yubaba takes Chihiro's characters, Yubaba can be argued as simultaneously “unlodging” the repressed for Chihiro. The repressed for Chihiro presents itself as the point of transitioning — both in the sense of moving to a new home in the physical world, and the transition of her body into the spirit world. In other words, the difference that is revealed for her as she is in transit. Taking what we know about the unary trait, it's suggested that the trait doesn't only belong to the physical representation. The unary traits established through Chihiro's turning to Sen brings to the forefront the difference of who she is regarding the space she is in and the entities that she is interacting with. Considering that *Kanji* illustrates birth, Yubaba's taking of these characters implies the death of Chihiro as well. The *Kanji* also can also be seen

functioning as Lacan's *objet petit a* for Chihiro. Because Haku advises Chihiro not to *forget* her name, the object of her name becomes an intrinsic and unconscious motivation for her as she navigates the spirit world.

Again, we see the concept of melancholy at work here –her longing to recover what was lost. Chihiro's name, seemingly irrecoverable, becomes the object cause of her desire to reunite with her parents. As the film progresses, it's illustrated that she had come close to forgetting her name but is only reminded through a goodbye card that Haku held for her when they first met. Once she realizes that she had forgotten her name, she states "Chihiro... that's my name, isn't it? I can't believe I had almost forgotten my name." Chihiro uses the word forgotten, but I think that saying she had "lost" her name is also relevant here. It is in the "lostness" of the object that the subject comes to experience melancholia. It seems that Chihiro's name might be sinking into her unconscious. This (re)naming becomes the undoing of Chihiro's identity while also allowing a space for her to re-identify herself. Perhaps in other words, the act of dissociation becomes an extension that allows for identification. Knowing that Chihiro has been renamed, she must work to reunite with the most important part of her identity in her adolescence — her parents. Or her history. It's from the concept of the *Kanji* in combination with the significance of the name that I want to connect to the immigrant experience. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the renaming process for the immigrant indicates the re-identification of the individual who is wanting to assimilate into a new space. Who do they become? And where does the original identity go? Is there a chance for the "multiplicity of selves" to be unified? I say history here as a point of departure to think about the way that history perpetuates (future) action being that action that hasn't happened yet but is still relevant to the process of recovering identity for the Asian-American immigrant. The relationship with the parents becomes a historical object for the

immigrant such that the relationship may be the only tie to an “original” recovery of identity. Chihiro’s situation reflects this. Chihiro’s reclamation of her identity is imminent insofar as the desire to recover her history persists. In other words, she can’t forget her name. And perhaps by extension, for the Asian-Immigrant viewer of *Spirited Away*, they can’t forget their name either or risk falling further into melancholy.

### Transitional Spaces and Ghostly Subjects

Chihiro’s anxiety of reclaiming her name and finding her parents stresses the loss of her autonomy. As Chihiro wrestles with situating herself in a foreign world with a new name, the borders of her being are multiplied through her assignments and relationships. The multiplicities of herself can be first illustrated by the relationship between her and her parents and the spirit, No-Face. These relationships are transitory and therefore dissociative because as Chihiro moves through the film, she loses her parents first, then herself physically. Because Chihiro has experienced a combination of losses, she lacks a sense of continuity and stability which invites dissociation. She becomes “borderless” in this sense with no concrete space that she can occupy. Miyazaki maintains this borderlessness concept stating, “In this borderless age, a [person] who doesn’t have a place to put down [their] roots will be looked down upon. A place is the past and also a history. A [person] without history or a people that forgot its past will have no choice but to disappear, like a shimmer of light...” (17). Borders can be thought of as names because, as Chao had expressed in her article, names can act as resistance while also being indications of belonging to a family and a history. In other words, they separate but also contain something. As Miyazaki writes, there are roots that belong to a person. These cultural roots must be planted to

grow but *Spirited Away*'s Chihiro entertains the concept of rerooting and how an individual navigates the space they may have been forcefully planted in.

I use the word forcefully to emphasize the fact that when we meet Chihiro, she is along for the ride as her parents move. She is strung along still as her parents want to explore the abandoned theme park and even more so, she is unwillingly thrust into the spirit world as she experiences the consequences of her parents' actions. Chihiro experiences her parents' history as a repercussion of the actions they chose with no expressible agency — maybe in other words, a generational trauma. This lack of agency in Chihiro is something that many immigrants experience, being forced to assimilate from their “hometown” to an “international place.” Susan Napier writes of this experience that *Spirited Away* engages with, stating these trends of transition “have dominated Japanese society...and are summed up by the catchwords *kokusaika* and *furusato*” (287). She reveals from Jennifer Robertson that these trends, “appear to represent opposite trajectories [but] actually exist conterminously as refractive processes and products...together indexing the ambiguity of Japanese national identity and its tense relationship with cultural identities” (Napier 288). Furthermore, this index is a sign of national melancholia in this example. Stephen Frosh says melancholia is the effect of a psychically incorporated lost object (melancholic object) means that the object “retains some of its integrity, even a kind of ‘purity’; but it is also always out of time and out of place, *displaced*, so that even its revolutionary potential as an excluded other is infected by violence and pain” (57). This integrity and even purity is accentuated in Chihiro's fight for identification. Along with immigration and assimilation, this speaks to the importance of *Spirited Away*.

I think, at this intersection, it's most revelatory for viewers who watch *Spirited Away* to wrestle with this refractive process which allows them to engage with animation as a space in

between. Because, as the complex development of *Spirited Away* shows, there is a process that bridges ambiguous experience, the experience of loss at a national and individual level and most times, both. Napier suggests that *Spirited Away* is a “complex exploration of a contemporary Japan that is searching for what might be termed *cultural recovery* or perhaps *cultural rehabilitation...*” (289, my emphasis). The term “cultural recovery” is what I want to sit with in the latter half of this chapter. I want to suggest a cultural recovery, that is, a folding of identities onto another, but with the relationships between these multiplicities still being prevalent. In other words, the superimposition of (cultural) identities that haunt one another complicates the emerging identifications. For examples of this, I turn to the relationships that Chihiro has with the spirit “No-Face.”

Freud’s concept of the “uncanny” offers a complementary perspective of immigrant melancholia and an object of (mis)identification. Freud explains “the German word, ‘*unheimlich*’ is obvious the opposite of *heimlich*, meaning ‘familiar,’ ‘native,’ ‘belonging to the home,’” but what he elaborates on is that the *unheimlich* can only be considered as such when “one does not know where one is...the better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the object and events in it” (2). Within the scope of this chapter, it should be clear that Chihiro experiences this uncanniness. Disoriented and lost, Chihiro remarks of her being in the spirit world as “just a dream,” it’s not home, it’s an (spatial) Other. For the Japanese immigrant and the history that *Spirited Away* invokes, it’s this uncanniness that is emphasized through Chihiro. Napier posits the land of *Spirited Away* as “*fushigi na machi*” (wonderful or mysterious) and while these invite feelings of awe, it may also reveal the uncanny through the lens of nostalgia. Nostalgia in this sense is characterized by Napier as a “form [privileging] the (literally) ghostly past as an alternative to the mundane



present and, as Figal demonstrates, can be expressed by a tendency to ‘fetishize the fantastic, reifying fragments of *fushigi* into whole cultural manifestations that could then be identified as authentically Japanese’” (Napier 293, Figal, 221). So, through the uncanniness in the world of *Spirited Away*, there is an interaction that occurs between the fantastic animation and real-life Japan. Or we might think of the film *Spirited Away* haunting Japan in this sense: “[The film] suggests the fundamental permeability of boundaries, evoking a liminal world of uncertainty, loss, constantly changing identities, and abandoned simulacra, where old truths and patterns no longer seem to hold and where the deep-seated desire to return home may never be fulfilled” (Napier 295). Both the film and the character of Chihiro speak to the permeability of the immigrant and the psychological processes that Asian-Americans go through. There is a consistent need for homeostasis of the mind and body which is often challenged by a majority of people.

Chihiro’s interactions with No-Face showcase a cultural and historical haunting both at her level and the level of the viewer. We first meet No-Face on the bridge that connects the bathhouse to the other rise of the river. The spirit is interestingly positioned as something that is in transition from its place on the bridge. For his first couple of appearances, he does not *speak* at all, but still portrays human emotions that viewers can easily resonate with. It seems that No-Face has lost his way in the world by the way the spirit looks around, possibly for someone to help him. It seems that he no longer knows who he is. No-Face, as his name implies, lacks an identity. Napier describes No-Face as “the black-garbed, white visaged, phantom whom Chihiro finds hovering outside in the rain and invites into the bathhouse... No-Face is originally misidentified as a bathhouse guest” (303). From here, Chihiro invites No-Face into the house, and the spirit takes a particular interest in her since she is the only one who seemingly has

interacted with him in quite some time. Abandoned and liminal, as Napier describes, No-Face becomes a product of cultural haunting for Chihiro. “Characterized by emptiness and absence, No-Face reminds us [of] the idea of emptiness” (304), the key term, empty, used to describe postmodernity in contemporary Japan according to Napier because of the post war effects that the country experiences. No-Face, if assumed to be a wandering spirit, only pays attention to Chihiro because she notices him. She has filled an emptiness. The implication here is that through viewing *Spirited Away*, there’s a certain catharsis that occurs for the viewer to, not necessarily fill an emptiness, but to identify that there is something to be seen. Once something is seen, can something be unseen? Once something is identified, can it be misidentified? The repetition of misidentification for No-Face is particularly interesting when contrasted with Chihiro’s journey towards (self) identification. Mark Fisher writes, “*repetition* and *doubling* — themselves an uncanny pair which double and repeat each other — seem to be at the heart of every ‘uncanny’ phenomena which Freud identifies” (9). Continuously misidentified, No-Face represents a culture that has been lost. In this example, the culture is Japan. With Chihiro “recovering” No-Face, the spirit persistently haunts her as national melancholy might haunt the immigrant. No-Face’s (mis)identity is doubled against Chihiro’s and repeated until their interactions crescendo into scenes of consumption.

One of the most significant traits that No-Face has is the fact that it is essentially voiceless. The only time that No-Face can speak is after it consumes a spirit frog-worker in the bathhouse. No-Face appears to a frog spirit and lures him in with gold only to consume him whole. At this point, No-Face begins to take on the characteristics of the frog. He can now speak in the frog’s voice. Initially describing this voiceless characteristic, Napier expresses the fact that No-Face, “voiceless, must swallow others in order to speak, it lives only to consume” and while

this idea of consumption is certainly relevant through a capitalist lens, I can not go further on this matter yet.

Instead, I posit the voice as a melancholic object, especially the national voice, perhaps one that is a voice belonging to the ideology of a nation. Returning to Frosh, “If melancholia is organized around a lost object that can later be recovered it fixes the subject in the past...it is premised on the idea that there is a truth-trauma to be uncovered and mourned...” (61), however as Frosh draws from Žižek, “there is no lost object...but rather a constitutional and universal experience of *lack*” and the subject develops a way to deal with this lack by pretending that it is actually a loss, inventing a lamentable object even though it may have not been necessary to mourn at all.” The main takeaway here is that even if there is no lost object there is still the concept of loss that needs to be recovered. Within this film, the object lost is signified and elevated to the national level and to the level of identification. For No-Face, the object lost is the voice. Now, if No-Face is a symbol for postmodern Japan, where does the voice take occupation? Can the Melancholic speak? The answer to this might be found in the dissatisfaction that comes from subjective desire. The voice-object may be heard but not listened to. For No-Face, the only way that the spirit speaks is through consumption and that voice is not its own. It’s this kind of ‘melancholia’ that understands “the recovery of the lost object not as something that refers only to the past, but as a ghostly act of troubling the present because of its *continuing* suffering” (Frosh 63).

Towards the end of Chihiro’s journey, she is able to identify her parents in the pig pen because she was able to hold onto her name therefore allowing her to situate her own identity. No-Face’s relationship with Chihiro casts a new light on national recovery and haunting showing that there is still a way to recover lost objects and maybe suggest a new way to view the

melancholic. Grace Lee states in a video essay that *Spirited Away*, “exhibits an acceptance that change is necessary and even good — that the self doesn’t just have to be about the identities and names [we] are given but also the ones that we chose.” Important to note is that the haunting of cultural histories can be used as a way to achieve identification through the process of difference that is superimposed on the modern experience. In the liminal space of transnationality, melancholic individuals have to hold onto their histories, allowing these histories to haunt them, giving way to new voices.

## CHAPTER THREE

Consuming Melancholy: Exploring *Disney's* short film *Bao*

“Why does tragedy exist?  
 Because you are full of rage.  
 Why are you full of rage?  
 Because you are full of grief.”

— Anne Carson, *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*

As seen from the previous chapters, melancholia drives certain characters and seeps into the constructions of animated storytelling even though the animated medium is initially aimed at children. Even more so, when engaging with the Asian American audience, there's a throughline that links *ATLA* and *Spirited Away* in terms of immigration and national melancholy. Recalling Zuko, we see that speaking out in the Fire Nation is culturally disrespectful. This form of disrespect isn't so far removed from the cultural interactions that are applied when it comes to Eastern and Western interactions. Similarly, from Chihiro, the name becomes melancholic and with No-Face, the lack of autonomous voice invites us to think about silence. Certainly, sound and dialogue are items that come to mind but where there is sound, there is silence. Turning to Disney's short film *Bao* directed by Domee Shi, silence arguably becomes the melancholic object for the subjects in this film.

*Bao* (2018) illustrates the relationship between a Chinese immigrant mother wrestling with empty nest syndrome. Shi's short film marks her as the first woman to direct a Pixar short in the history of the company. This eight-minute short film features an anthropomorphized bao dumpling that was created by the mother. Shi tells Greg Morabito in an *Eater* interview that “the story was loosely inspired by my own life growing up as an only child to my two Chinese parents... I wanted to kind of explore that in an allegorical, modern-day-fairytale way with this short” (Shi, “How ‘Bao’ Director Domee Shi Created Pixar’s Dumpling Story”). In addition to

this, Shi explains that the challenges that come with animating this type of short film needed more “cultural consultant credit” to which she enlisted the help of her own mother to emphasize the importance of “her actions and [to] replicate them on the big screen as accurately as possible.” Furthermore, Shi remarks, “when the mom [in the film] starts rolling and stuffing the dough, audiences will be seeing ‘basically my mom’s hands.’” Elevating this cultural consulting to another level, in an additional interview with Tracy Brown from the *Los Angeles Times*, Brown essentially asks the question: How cognizant were you of Asian-American and immigrant experiences when creating this story? Shi’s replies that these experiences were “one of my reasons for wanting to do a story like this...I grew up watching a lot of...movies by Studio Ghibli...that was one of my biggest influences too.”

The comprehensive plot of *Bao* is as follows: A Chinese couple —husband and wife, are living in Toronto, Canada. The wife cooks some dumplings as the husband leaves for work. Once the husband leaves, one of the dumplings comes to life and cries as if it were an infant. The dumpling sprouts a body of its own and the mother cares for the bao as if it were her own child. But since the bao is soft and fragile, the mother becomes overprotective of it as the bao grows.

As some time passes, indicated by the bao’s glasses and facial hair, the bao, probably around its teenage years, becomes more rebellious and independent. It wants to play soccer and be with friends. The third act shows the mother worrying about the distance that is developing between her and the bao as the bao returns home after a night out with a fiancée, intending to move out. The mother refuses to let the bao leave and when she struggles to stop it, she *eats* it. Immediately shocked and ashamed, we cut to the mother weeping in bed as her actual son (who heavily resembles the bao) enters, obviously revealing the previous two acts as a metaphor for

the strained relationship. The son apologizes and they reconcile as they eat bao together. The film ends with the family together again, joined by the fiancée, making baos together.

Shi's short offers a combination of autobiographical experiences as well as her mother's experience of immigration and maintaining relationships. Shi goes on to tell Becky Neiman in another interview by *Time*, that she was hesitant to pitch the idea that "[the story] might be too dark or culturally specific." Perhaps, this is why Pixar chose this short film to produce — to finally expand on the trends of telling different stories by different storytellers. *Bao* essentially invites the audience into the world of symbolic identification through Shi's own mother, using her as a reference for the short film.

In contrast with the previous chapters, this short introduces aspects of melancholia without dialogue. It's here that the previous implications of melancholia and immigration will be applied to the interactions between these characters. Additionally, attention to the stylistic medium that will be explored in this chapter dealing with silence as another tool for melancholy. While the previous chapters have dealt with characters that operate on a wider relationship with national melancholia, *Bao* centers on the mother/son relationship that complicates the psychoanalytic inflections, ultimately enriching the experience of the immigrant (melancholic) narrative.

### "Please Don't Go...I Love You So"

In the Brown interview, Domee Shi reveals the inspiration for the climax of *Bao*, "It also came from my own life. My mom would often hold me close and say 'Oh, I wish I could put you back in my stomach, so I knew exactly where you were at all times.'" A few lines down she touches on what potentially drives the melancholic subject saying, "I wanted to tap into that primal feeling

of just wanting to love something so much that you're willing to destroy it, so it won't go away."

What's really revealing here is that love is not so far removed from the melancholic subject.

Perhaps because melancholy is the realization that the object cause of desire has been lost and cannot be recovered or identified, love is the (re)identification of the object. Love here in the context of melancholia declares the value of an object insofar as it comes from a place of loss.

Love identifies a new object of value so that the melancholic may be temporarily satisfied. To put it another way, melancholy realizes that loss has occurred and love attempts to substitute and satisfy the subject. In the case of *Bao* the mother must reidentify the lost object (bao-made-son) in order to substitute an object of desire.

The bao/son metaphor is working on three levels here. The son is growing up, moving away, and has found a partner. On the first level, this speaks to the relationship of the (immigrant) mother with the son. On the second level, the partner of the bao/son in the film is animated as a Caucasian woman and when the mother sees her for the first time, she expresses feelings of shock, perhaps even disbelief illustrating the relational separation. The third level then — because the Caucasian woman is initially threatening the mother's desire to protect her son becomes an example, in the context of immigration, of ideological and cultural assimilation for the son while *also simultaneously* rejecting his original culture, to embrace one means refusing another in this sense. Cheng writes of this "double loss" being that "the melancholic minority is doubly versed in the art of losing. [They have] to forfeit the full security of [their] imaginary integrity...but then [are] forced to take in and re-identify with that loss: a double loss" (175). This third level produces the double loss thus further fracturing cultural identity which also proves to be the reason why the mother would consume the "living" bao/son. On all levels, the object is lost for the mother.



In *Bao*, the mother's relationship with her child becomes what Timothy Richardson calls, "an object of contention." In his analysis of the "Judgment of Solomon," when explaining the trial involving two mothers regarding the identity and custody of a child, Richardson writes that "the child is an object of desire for both parties inasmuch as he is what would decide one woman's position as mother over the other...the child is exactly such an object in that it is *only* an object of desire disputed by...two rivals who want it" (76, 77, emphasis in original). For us in this context, an object of contention is what is made from the bao/son. Because of the struggle for ownership between the mother and the fiancée, the mother must make the choice to completely lose the son or experience the pain of letting him go with the fiancée becoming inherently changed and potentially irrecoverable. In any case, the mother loses her son in a "forced choice" (Lacan, Seminar XI). Stepping out of the "bao" metaphoric dream, we can assume that the mother actually lets the son go with the fiancée. The loss of the son invites melancholy for the mother at various levels from which the loss is operating. Of course, the mother knows that she has lost her son, but arguably she may not be conscious as to how deep that loss runs in her mind, therefore producing this type of bao- metaphor to work through the loss.

In this way, the son's development of a subject opposes the subjectivity of the mother. Worth noting here is that the experience of the mother losing her son is a (re)telling of the loss that had already happened. The metaphor as presented to the audience is viewed as a history of the mother, a repeated event reframed. The loss of the son is not so much a physical loss but a division or perhaps a fragmentation of the relationship between the mother and the son. In this way, the traumatic event is re-presented to the audience in the bao metaphor. As previously mentioned, the bao becomes an object-of-contention between the mother and the fiancée. As the

bao stands in for the living son, the assertion is that the son now becomes a personal subject of contention. Subject in this sense is used to differentiate the aspects of the human that cannot be reduced to an object and becoming an individual who desires. The sons' desire to become independent directly conflicts with the mother's desire for him to stay.

In this case, the bao's anthropomorphized characteristics now transform it into the substitution for the son as subject of contention, demonstrating the melancholy of the metaphor. What is meant by this is that the struggle to dis-associate the loss that the mother experiences must be resolved through the integration of metaphoric loss, in a dream-like frame. Caruth touches on this as she writes about Freud's explanation of trauma stating that "the returning traumatic dream perplexes...because it cannot be understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is, purely and inexplicably, the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits....the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way" (61). The dream for the mother in *Bao* becomes an event that must be psychically worked through via metaphor of the bao. The son as the subject of contention becomes a focal point for the mother as an unwanted experience of the loss that has occurred. The significance of the word "unpleasurable" is something that should be tended to as well. Since the mother imagines the son as food, the unpleasurable (event) becomes wrapped up in the experience of something pleasurable like eating. I will return to this concept in a moment. For now, I want to reiterate another concept from Caruth to which she says this:

"Repetition is never simply a representation nor its absence but rather the reenactment — and potential erasure — of a history that refuses recognition. Trauma is not a question of whether there is or is not representation but rather the question of whether there will or

will not be (the possibility of) history. What emerges from the site of this potential erasure of history at the heart of trauma is likewise not a form of representation but rather *a command to respond* that intervenes — historically — in the oscillation between death and survival” (132, parenthesis and emphasis in original).

This refusal of recognition is paramount in *Bao* and especially so in the context of immigration and the implications that are associated with it. Because the metaphor of the bao/son is so pertinently situated for (acceptance of) assimilation, concurrently this refusal of recognition is applied to the cultural separation that is occurring through the son’s relationship with the Caucasian fiancée. In other words, this “oscillation” occurs in the mother’s mind via metaphor as an attempt to recognize the (cultural) death of the son, and the emerging survival of a new son as a *response* to the impending (possible) erasure of their culture. This is the connection that resonates with Asian-American immigrants and their national identity. Anne Cheng says, “in the splintering landscape of grief, identification and sympathy are at once imperative and fraught” (170). For the (bao’s) mother, perhaps realizing the fear of erasure means actively consuming the loss. The mother must make the decision of allowing her son the opportunity to recognize another place in his own identity or must eat up the identity of the son.

### Consuming Melancholy

Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, writes, “To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization” (2), and this is exactly the power that spoken language holds. Returning to Zuko’s example, speaking

holds the power to solidify and expose intentions but speaking in that context also produces disrespect in the Fire Nation. In terms of culture, there is an attention to silence that deserves recognition in various ways. *Bao* certainly touches on this. While silence is not a new trait that has been applied to film, there is something to be said about the experience of viewing an animated, silent, short film. Silence here is meant to be taken as “no dialogue spoken” and not as a film without any sound effects. Brown again touches on this aspect of the film, asking the question: “How does working on a project with no dialogue compare to working on something with words?” Shi answers, “We really wanted to push ourselves to tell this story in a purely visual way...by taking out dialogue...you’re stripping away language as a barrier so [the] story could be understood by people of all ages, backgrounds, and cultures.” She concludes the answer by stating that Chinese culture has always shown their love and communicated it through their actions. And this concept is something that Lacan mentions in *Encore*, the concept of speaking “without knowing it, [speaking] with [the body] ...always say[ing] more” (227), than what is known. In this way, *Bao* holds the weight of a culture in the silence that ensures the emphasis of immigrant melancholy and identification. Because the film has no dialogue, the work to identify with the characters and narrative must be stronger in the sense that the viewer must provide the understanding in their own accord. This is different from traditional film in that the viewers might be able to identify through *language*. In *Bao*, viewers must process the *visual* identification with something that is a cartoon.

In this way, the film assumes the place as a transitional object (that depicts transitional objects/subjects in itself). Eng and Han say that,

“The transitional object, Adam Phillips observes, ‘is always a combination, but one that provides by virtue of being more than the sum of its parts, a new and third alternative,’ opening up a space of thirdness. This third space is not a dead-end space of obstacles but one of psychic triangulation, possibility, and potentiality, an intermediate area, a space of creative play. (89, embedded, Phillips 114, *Winnicott*).

“Combination” from Phillips is taken to be a combination of that which is appreciated and that which can provide a connection in terms of (racial) differences but *Bao* as an animated film qua transitional object that highlights melancholic identifications is what should be clarified here. While Eng and Han point to the transitional object as a transnational individual immigrating, the form of animation itself is also a comment on the transitional object. This animation, in itself, becomes a space of creative play that also acts as another way of recognizing melancholy for the transnational audience.

It’s really here that the nuances of *Bao* are able to arrest the audience in a meaningful (and playful) way. With so much attention and effort going into the bao creation and metaphor, one wonders what the significance of making a cultural food has to do with identification. The argument here is that the process of making the Chinese baozi is that it becomes an inherent form of identification for the culture. In other words, a piece representative of a larger concept or a synecdoche. Taken in the context of the short film, that the bao/son is literally made (birthed?) by the mother underscores the extension of her own identity, and again extends this metaphor to the national level. The ritual of making the bao is reminiscent of an identificatory trait as seen at the end of the film, when after the mother consumes the bao, she is revealed to be in her room, grieving

the absence of her son. The son enters and offers her the bao indicating that he still holds onto the cultural identification that was supposedly (going to be) erased in the mother's mind. Furthermore, the fiancée makes an appearance in the final scene, as the family gathers around the table making the baos with the fiancée surprisingly succeeding in making one of her own.

Bao-making as a ritual and as an identificatory practice further evidences the cultural connections and separations of the mother and son. But it's here that the identification through the bao becomes the point of focus. "Identification organizes and instantiates identity," writes Cheng, "it is a fluid and repetitive process that in a sense...[provides] an origin of identity and identity that would just as soon forget in order to maintain its own immediacy and wholeness"(177). It's this subtension between identification and identity that maintains interpersonal negotiation . It's from this negotiation that melancholy arrives for the transnational individual as seen from the mother in this film. Which part of the son is she willing to give up to (temporarily) satisfy the absence? Further down, "Identification is thus a form of *cannibalism*...A fundamental relationship that has been set up between identification and the compensation of loss. As such, identification may be in fact be said to be, literally, an *expression* of grief" (178, first emphasis mine, second in original).

The substantive tragedy of *Bao* is that there is an unpleasurable loss that occurs even if it's presented in a playful way. Because Domee Shi had borrowed so much of her own life experiences to deliver this animation in such a nuanced and perhaps profound way, there is a connection that occurs to the cartoon experiences that are also elevated to the audience in terms of transnationality and identity within the family. The lack of

dialogue and discourse of the body speaks to the animated aspects that mask the grief stemming from transnational individuals only to deliver a more palpable message: how does one recover after loss? The ending of *Bao* is one of reunion but maybe, at the heart, there is still a loss, doubly felt, of a new culture that is haunted by a previous one. There are no inherent negative effects of this though. It stands as an expression of grief — the remembering of identification and the repetition of that which is continuously consumed.

## CONCLUSION

## (Re)covering Loss: Toward Objects of Substitution

“Then practice losing farther, losing faster: places, and names, and where it was you meant to travel. None of these will bring disaster.”

—Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art”

I remember watching “Avatar: The Last Airbender” for the first time and thinking somewhere in the back of my mind, why does Zuko’s story of loss and redemption stand out to me? In the world of the Four Nations, with all the possibilities that were presented to the viewers, I found myself in my childhood recognizing that I felt a little unbalanced like Zuko’s story illustrated him to be — that a lack was being uncovered and acknowledged through his storyline. I didn’t know the ways to articulate it then but now it seems to be a privilege to be able to sit and think through the reasons why Loss had surrounded my own life and to wrestle with something as “simple” as cartoons which had led me toward a project like this. As I grew older and attempted to critically reflect on subjects and characteristics lack and loss, I realized that interactions with other Filipino-Americans deepened these characteristics. I suddenly was “not Filipino enough” since I didn’t speak Tagalog. I was not Filipino enough because I hadn’t gone back to the homeland. I was not Filipino enough because I couldn’t make authentic Filipino cuisine. I speculate this cultural distillation is a result of being a first generation American as my mother had come to America as a child and had to assimilate into the culture. I became (and am still) concerned with distillation that seems inherent as I anticipate the maturation of my son’s identity.

bell hooks writes in “Theory as Liberatory Practice” that she “came to theory because [she] was hurting,” that the pain within her was “so intense” that she could not go on living. hooks approached theory with the desperation of wanting to comprehend “— to grasp what was



happening around and within [herself]” and that she saw within theory “a location for healing” (59). She goes on to quote Terry Eagleton in *The Significance of Theory* at length which I also find worth including at this point. Eagleton says, “children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as ‘natural’ and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten” (59). Eagleton’s sentiment posits that children will ask the “simple” questions whereas adults, all too wrapped up in the nuances of longer-lived experiences, forget to engage with the cores of these practices that children frequently notice. They ask: “Why?”

And so, I find myself engaging with the “simplicity” of such a question in the forms of (cultural) identification and, perhaps naturally, must follow the white rabbit wherever it is going. Curiosity is, well, a curious thing — a curious *object*, probably. While the trajectory of this project is expressed through the primary terms of identification and melancholy, there still leaves plenty of room for other curious explorations. Natalie Loveless writes that “to do research — of any kind — is not simply to ask questions; it is to let our curiosities drive us and allow them to *ethically* bind us; it is to tell stories and to pay attention not only to which stories we are telling and *how* we are telling them, but how they through *their very forms*, are *telling us*” (24). So, I arrive at the concluding remarks curious about the forms of stories that are telling us and how they attempt to ethically bind us.

Within this project, the filmic mode of animation demands attention — especially in terms of identification and (national) melancholy. Theories within psychoanalysis have dealt with subjects and the identification process but what has yet to be fully explored are the racial aspects of identification. Indeed, there is now a very small but growing body of scholarship that

continues to wrestle with race, culture, and ethnic identity in psychoanalytic terms (*Lacan and Race*, George and Hook). In addition to this however, to apply these concepts to film, especially animated film, there is a wide range and avenues for scholarship to grow into. To view the texts of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Spirited Away*, and “*Bao*” through the psychoanalytically inflected terms of melancholy and identification opens a new reflective opportunity to view the relationship between animated films and audience. With transnational and cultural aspects additionally applied, we see that through the nuances of animation and storytelling that there is a connection that arrests viewers. The (re)presentation of these texts asks us to engage with identification possibilities that might not have been as obvious beforehand. This is to say, with the rise of “breaking” holds that generational (ethnic/cultural) trauma has on individuals, recognizing the difference is imperative to begin processing loss. This move in accepting difference and allowing that mechanism to be a productive mode of identification is demonstrated by Zuko’s experience with the Fire Nation and the loyalty he comes to develop for himself instead of his father. Zuko’s journey allows viewers to put themselves in a similar cultural position. When an individual struggles with identification and melancholy, *ATLA* offers the tentative solution: to lose everything about oneself that one doesn’t *love*. This becomes the ability to reflect on oneself so deeply that one can situate themselves without straying away from their own newfound identity. Zuko’s example rightly aligns with that of Asian-American immigrants as Han and Eng have established through their own case studies regarding racial melancholy/dissociation. In this way, there are multiple aspects of identification that have been touched on throughout.

The predication of melancholy rests upon the multiplicities, the many opportunities that present themselves in situations that allow for new ways of engagement. Some have been

explored throughout this project. As melancholy drives the subject towards substitutes, one must consider what substitute will be (temporarily) satisfactory (if at all). As explored, transnational and immigrant melancholy stems from displacement and loss, whether it be conscious *and* unconscious, physical, *and* “spiritual,” dialectically/semiotically. As from the chapter on *ATLA*, I speculate that the “quilting point” must be a way for the melancholic subject to experience identification. This is the presumption that I navigate throughout this project with regard to Chihiro. The historicity of displacement for the examples throughout this project is indicative of substitution and an attempt to establish a meaningful relation among the texts. From Chihiro’s example, the way that Miyazaki demonstrates and intricately weaves together Japan’s history into *Spirited Away* through Chihiro’s character is telling especially for viewers who may have undergone such a displacement and dissociative process especially for those that have experienced immigration and loss of agency in a foreign space. As explored, the identities that we chose become the most important ones in a space that is attempting to control all aspects of identification.

From Domee Shi’s *Bao*, (mis)identification in the form of the mother’s metaphor for realizing the loss of her son adds another layer to the process of how melancholism works for the Asian-American immigrant. This layer is projected through the cultural importance of food and food-making rituals that underscore racial identity and loss. The form of the short film, with the lack of dialogue, accentuates the audience’s ability to connect with the story and characters that are being portrayed. This facilitates engagement because of the way that the audience has to interact with the visual story. They presumably pay a little more attention to a short film with no dialogue. At the core of all these texts though, there is the universal experience of loss, melancholy, and love.

Transference, Lacan's seminar IX, would even further complicate the aims of this project with the tentative focus being on transferring partial desires through difference in a way that resembles Lacan's definition of love. Whereas the main concepts here deal with identification of the subject-in-animation, expanding on the loving relationship of the transnational subject within the cartoon texts would potentially add to the process of identification by allowing an opportunity for a more introspective engagement. As the animated characters are created, the question posed would be: how do this character's actions, visual affects, and ethics allow for a pleasurable experience? Here, this Lacanian perspective offers another way into the live-action adaptations of animation. With a Netflix produced *ATLA* set to release around the time of completion for this project, (M. Night Shyamalan's *Avatar* isn't mentioned within the scope of this project), the relationality shifts from imaginary characters to those played by actors revealing more potential for routes of exploration.

The introduction of live-action adaptations into the stream of this project would require contemplating the potential cultural erasure that studios participate in when adapting cultural stories, which was the original direction I wanted to take here. Disney Studios is seemingly going through a renaissance of live-action adaptations for their classic Disney films such as *The Lion King* (2019), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) in which (signifying) voices now become bodies in some cases. *The Lion King* makes the point to include a list of Black actors/voices attempting to stay close to the African inspired storyline and visuals.

As this project continues to marinate in relation to the patterns of Hollywood, I find myself thinking about the capitalist implication that comes from live-action adaptations and the commodification of race and culture under the guise of diversity and inclusion. Disney's hyper-realities are marketed and as Lillian Rösing points out, "in a dialectical way, computer

animation may sometimes bring us closer to the real by way of its virtuality. [Animators]...study in detail the structure and functioning of the materials they imitate, be it skin, fur, hair, water, textile, drool” (167). This surplus of reality perhaps reinstates a *jouissance* for the racialized and ethno-national subject. Again, I recognize the use of *jouissance* here as being used for the first time, however as I think through the future of this project, the term seems relevant to mention. Aptly put, as the design and animation of cultural stories begins to go mainstream, how do these films go beyond (pleasure)? Domee Shi’s *Turning Red* (2021) includes a cooking scene, identical to the bao-making scene, that pays attention to almost all details of sensing. The (hyper-)realism engages the audience to the point where it seems as if the ingredients for a meal are presented on screen in real life.

Furthermore, Pixar Animation Studios and Disney Studios Motion Pictures have worked on and developed a section of short films under their *ShortSparks* program, which aims to give animation creators six months and a limited budget to develop indie short films, all of them based on personal experiences. President for Pixar Animation studios, James Morris, stated that, “the *ShortSparks* program is designed to discover new storytellers, explore, new storytelling techniques, and experiment with new production workflows... [providing] an opportunity to unlock the potential of individual artists and their inventive filmmaking approaches on a smaller scale than Pixar’s normal fare” (SparkShorts 2019). One of these films is called *Float* which is written and directed by Filipino-American Bobby Rubio that also can be interpreted through the lens of melancholia and aspects of psychoanalysis.

In combination with aspects of melancholy, immigration, and identification, the way that animated films can deliver a new perspective on these aspects is complex. Following the thread of identification and the construction that animators put into films, there is a multilayered

experience that one must sit with. This might be especially true regarding Asian-American audiences and the stories that are being told that touch on such intimate parts of their lives. The history of an individual, being (re)presented through a medium that seems to situate itself in between reality and other forms of films is something worth exploring. Animated film reveals intricacies of (mis)recognizing the various versions of ourselves in order to reveal which identities must be assumed at a certain place and time.

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