

issue no. 10

STRENGTH IN
ADVERSITY

at the core

VULNERABILITY + DESIGN PUBLICATION



Editor's Letter:

In celebration of AANHPI Heritage Month, we bring you a special issue highlighting the creative works of Asians in America.

With a rise in Asian hate crimes and violence, solidarity has become a pillar of hope in overcoming tragedies weighing down our communities. More now than ever, Asians are using and finding their voice, and showcasing and challenging what it means to be Asian in this country.

I haven't always felt connected to my own Asian heritage, but in light of all that's happened, there's something unexplainably moving about the strength that's forming in response to adversity.

I am humbled to be collaborating with Oesef, who did this issue's stunning cover, Anna, who is my loyal friend and copyeditor, and of course, five incredibly talented participants to tell the beautiful and complex narratives of Asians. Reading the writing, admiring the work, and having the privilege of shaping each layout has brought a sense of pride that I truly have no words for.

And as always, a big thank you to the readers who continue to support this passion project. ATC may be going on a publishing hiatus, but I look forward to debuting the next iteration of the brand and continuing to address what it means to be human, at the core.

Ibby Day
Editor in Chief

special thanks to: *Anna Grace Cook*
Copyeditor

AT
THE
CORE

ATC is an independent, not-for-profit publication driven by passion and a goal of sharing stories and artwork that remind us that we're all human at the core. If you'd like to be in our next issue, please email ibbyday@gmail.com.

Paper:
Hammermill 60lb Color Copy Digital Cover

table of contents

Korean Specialty / <i>by Seyeon Juhn</i>	<i>pages 6-9</i>
Artist Feature / <i>Wes Chen</i>	<i>pages 10-13</i>
Origins / <i>by Ibby Day</i>	<i>pages 14-15</i>
Artist Feature / <i>Cate Austriaco</i>	<i>pages 16-19</i>
Untitled / <i>by Ann Li</i>	<i>pages 20-21</i>
Artist Feature / <i>Ann Li</i>	<i>pages 22-25</i>
Artist Feature / <i>Arlene Tomista</i>	<i>pages 26-29</i>

KOREAN SPECIALTY

한녀 탈출기 (韓女脫出記)

by Seyeon Juhn

I attended a university in Seoul founded by an American woman, Mary F. Scranton, who wanted girls to be treated like humans. She was like, “Would you just let the girls learn something?”. After a series of happenings, like parents barging into classrooms to take girls out from doing PE because it’s improper for young women, the school became a good certification for the “proper daughter-in-law hood”. Time passed, and when I entered, it was more of a college filled up with some snobby girls underestimating men. Like other old academies, there was a student handbook, which nobody used because smartphones had already taken over everything by then. But since the book’s price was included in tuition, there was no reason to not get it. We would flip through it to see what was in it, although most contents remained the same yearly. One of the most interesting ones was the ‘Alumni living abroad’ list, which was included as an emergency list. Women were living in parts of the world I hadn’t thought of. Often they even didn’t mention their husbands. We used to joke that our school’s specialty is women living abroad alone.

After a decade, I kinda joined that list too.

When I was asked to share my experience as an Asian American, I was happy to do so while half of my mind was like, ‘Isn’t my life as an ‘American Korean’ longer than that as an Asian American? Moreover, isn’t that a more interesting thing to talk about?’ If you’re a Korean and U.S. citizen, you’ll first hear, “So you don’t have to serve in the military!” (South Korea requires two years of military service for adult males.) They won’t care that the Korean women don’t need to serve in the military in the first place. “You still wouldn’t have to join the army even if you were a man anyway!”

Not surprisingly, a major number of American/Korean men do join the military. No need to say that it never hurts to have two citizenships, leaving some options. But it doesn’t matter. People just want to emphasize that you’re privileged. And I would say that life as a “privileged girl” in Korea is FUN. It even gets jollier if you have troll instincts - Every step you take becomes a fun battleground. As a person whose “rebellion against authoritarianism is etched into the subconscious,” certified by a psychology expert, the last quarter century of my life in Korea has been a series of moments where I’ve enjoyed making fun of people like that (and my parents used to tell me, “could you stop it for the love of god?”) In contrast, life as an Asian in the U.S. is - for better or worse - carefree.

Yup. A carefree Asian in this post-COVID era.

I won’t say that there’s some heaven. Even before I arrived in the U.S., I didn’t have high expectations when I found a Craigslist listing for a “girlfriend/ roommate” who said he was a white man in his 40s who ‘loves’ Asian girls during house searching. It was six months after that I got a passenger in some random pickup truck yelling, “Never give any car key to Asian bitches” when I got involved in a car crash. During the pandemic, I couldn’t tell if someone walking across the street for social distancing was being kind to me or if they were trying to avoid the ‘China flu’ deliverer. And it’s only recently that I’ve realized that my other Asian female friends with “feminine hair” have dealt with frequent sexual harassment while I never experienced them (I have short hair).

Funnily enough, I’m still more carefree than I was in Korea. Someone once told me that immigrating is a choice between “this shit” and “that shit”, so I decided to try American shit this time since I’m very familiar with Korean shit. My friend, who arrived earlier, warned me that I would get sick of American shittiness by the fifth year.

Five years have passed. America? It sucks. You could get shot the second you park at the grocery store's lot while you were hoping the shop still has some eggs. It's the kind of place where if it's raining, you have to put all the energy into your eyes the entire time while driving because the lanes are INVISIBLE. And the government says they have no enough tax money to fix this. AMERICA! HECK YEAH! And yet, I still think "that shit" (which is now "this shit") is slightly better. Of course, this is because I don't have to worry about my immigration status (unlike many 1st generations). Still, it makes the comparison more 1:1.

As for telling what it was like to be an "arrogant" and "vocal" young girl in South Korea, I'll leave that testimony to the ones I know who are doing better than I can and are still in Korea and fighting back all the nonsense. (Haein Shim is one of them, and she is a feminist activist who raises awareness of the situation in Korea.) However, as I said before, the specialty of Korea is the 'woman who lives alone.' Did I mention that it was a specialty of "my school"? Only elite women could leave the country back then (South Koreans were allowed to travel freely abroad after 1989), but nowadays, everyone can. And for the most part, it seems like everyone's doing fine.

I traveled to New York in 2016, shortly after I got furious about the sexual assault accusation in the 'hipster' art scene and the disappointing responses from the male "gurus." The realization that they had used me as a muse and the source of ideas without any credit made me sick enough of all of that. Then my Airbnb host, the house owner, showed up. She was an alumna of my school, another "Korean woman living alone in a foreign country." I asked her for her thoughts about moving to the U.S., and she said, "I wouldn't say it's easy, but it's affordable." You grew up and survived in Korea. So, any other problems?

Just like in 2013, when I learned from my mom's friend in France that 'living alone without marriage won't kill you,' this was also an a-ha moment. A year and a half later, I landed at LAX while being scolded by immigration for showing two passports, as I used to do in Korea ("Decide WHICH citizen to be!").

I don't know if I'm doing well-well or not. I can only hope that another pissed-off Korean woman looks at me and think, "Eh, seems like not a bad idea," and stroll away like I did eight years ago.

WES CHEN

What do you love about your culture that is understated?

The thing I love about my culture growing up Taiwanese-American is the importance of family and community in day to day life. I've had the immense privilege of visiting Taiwan a couple of times during my childhood and those visits opened my eyes to a more communal world than I was used to in suburban Orange County. My grandparents lived in a traditional village housing that led out to a shared walking street. I remember my grandmother waking up and being able to walk a few steps down the street to visit her friends for a daily mahjong session, talking and chatting with neighbors along the way. Other days, we'd ride in the family van to visit my cousins 5 minutes away and gather for a delicious home cooked dinner. This level of kinship seemed to bring happiness and joy to those living within their communities. I value that level of walkability and community and hope that America could learn a thing or two from it in the coming years.

Does your culture ever influence your work? If yes, how? If no, what does?

I think it definitely does to some degree. When I think of Taiwan, I see a country with several contrasting identities;

a country that has been shaped by many different cultures both colonial and indigenous (Dutch, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Indigenous) throughout the last few centuries. Knowing this, I always approach my work with how accessible it can be. How can I make this more pleasing to more people? How can I be as inclusive as possible? I value when design is clear and understandable but also as playful and inviting as possible.

Have you or a close friend ever experienced racism?

Describe a time.

Early in my elementary school life, my family ended up moving from Irvine (a city with a high immigrant population), to Ladera Ranch (a city with a much whiter, less diverse community). I remember being eager to make friends with the kids in our cul-de-sac, but was met with cold stares and backs turned. Our house was also teeped a few times out of the blue as well, which didn't feel great. Though I can't be 100% sure everything was racially motivated, I did feel like our family and I were not as welcome in that whiter, less diverse environment compared to our old community.



When thinking about the rise of Anti-Asian violence, what feelings or thoughts come up for you?

I think of how much work it must have taken for the AAPI communities to immigrate here to this so-called “Land of the Free”, yet still be faced with the dangers of racism. It’s 2023 and people are still dying and facing discrimination based on the color of their skin. I hope that Asian communities can transcend their bubbles and understand that their struggles are the same as those shared by the rest of the BIPOC community. I think we can be more intersectional with our struggles and be stronger together.

What are your hopes for the AAPI community this year?

I hope that the AAPI communities are able to more confidently share their cultures with those who may not understand it. I feel like our AAPI communities can be more outspoken, more confident to fight for their own rights. Hopefully instead of just posting “stop anti-asian hate” on our social media, we can work towards sharing what makes our identities truly special. Hopefully by doing this, more people will be able to understand our perspectives and therefore respect us a little more!



ORIGINS

by Ibbly Day

For a long time, I rejected the idea that I was Asian. As an adoptee who was raised by white parents in even whiter Minneapolis, white culture was all I understood.

It wasn't until I moved to California for 7th grade that the bubble popped, and my peers started looking like me. I didn't identify it as culture shock at the time, but looking back, there's no other way to describe the tension I felt between the two identities I was tied to.

At first, it was exciting, but truthfully the familiarity of white culture gave me a sense of belonging. That feeling only manifested tenfold in my teen years as I found it was just easier for me to relate to and talk to white people. It's not that I didn't have Asian friends—in fact when I moved most of my close friends were Asian—I could just sense a barrier preventing me from fitting in.

But it wasn't my friends that made me reject my Asianness, it was the interactions I'd have with their parents who somehow always ended up berating me for not knowing Vietnamese and or looking the way I did. Over time the pointed comments insinuating that I was unwelcome and a disgrace to my roots turned to bitterness, and I grew to loathe Asian culture.

I hated how tradition was so deeply embedded- everything from antiquated gender roles to the one-way standard of respecting those older than you. The whole thing felt ironic to me and I wanted no part in a culture that expected me to bend over backward for people who didn't accept me.

However, as I grow older I've started to connect the dots between my life experiences and believe that much of my frustration with my Asian identity was magnified in part due to the fact that I was navigating several minefields of my identity at once.

I came out after hiding for six years and announced my interracial relationship to the world and to both of our families. I started to feel comfortable with the way I dressed and chose to look, cutting my hair shorter and shorter each year. And I fell in love with art and began to take it seriously.

These self-realizations also came with a growing tumultuous relationship with my parents, several changes in friends, strangers' unwanted opinions, and ultimately a choice to conform or not.

Truth is, I'll always be a people pleaser at heart, but when my identities collided the illusion of being able to satisfy everyone forever ended. I could tell accommodating for others was shaping me into someone who would become deeply unhappy so I, with much fear, began to accept the sacrifices it would take to live the life I knew I wanted.

And it was the most freeing thing in the world.

Not caring so much about the judgments of others made me less judgmental myself, and allowed me to understand the complexities and subtleties in people. The anger I had felt for so long disappeared and acceptance became a strength of sorts. It opened up a sense of purpose—to discover and learn about others—that I thought didn't exist.

In fact, in the last few years, I've been able to redefine my relationship with Asian culture and find Asian communities who see and support the intersection of identities. Although there's always progress to be made, experiencing the growth and healing among communities has been one of the best parts of life, and I cannot wait to see what the future holds.

CATE AUSTRIACO

What do you love about your culture that is understated?

I think nowadays, people around the world are discovering Filipino culture through our food/Asian fusions. We worked so hard to get our culture noticed, which is what I love about the Philippines. I've recently discovered the poverty lifestyle in the Philippines and how they will recycle food and cook them into new dishes for the community. Although not the cleanest idea, re-cooking food into pag-pag, recycled food sealed in a bag and sold for cheap, for the people in the slums helps them make money and feed everyone. I love how hardworking and generous we are, which is why I don't think people realize that even poorer communities will push through the rainstorms for everyone else to eat.

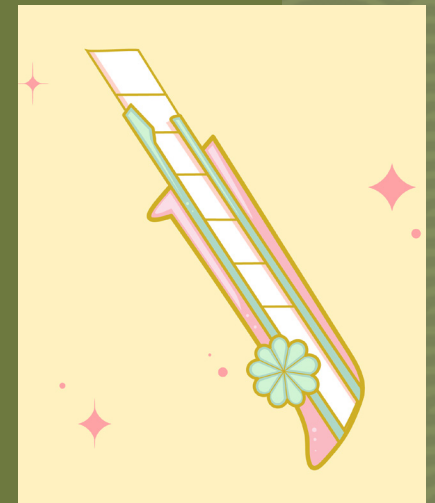
Does your culture ever influence your work? If yes, how? If no, what does?

I believe the only influences from my culture that ties into my work would relate to fashion and food. I admire the Filipino traditional textiles and pineapple fibre fabrics seen on Filipino garments, such as the Barong. There was an idea I had for the sleeves of a Filipinana dress fused with Japanese Lolita fashion, showing how I can amplify lolita style with a touch of pinoy pride. I won't spill more about those designs, or one of y'all might steal it!!!

In past work, I made collages for a children's book project about a vibrant filipino dessert called Halo-Halo, which I'd say is one of the most authentic, colorful shaved-ice desserts I've ever laid my eyes on. My halo-halo collages varied in different ingredients and amounts for each character's preferences. I'd say that's the most I've done that's introducing my culture to people who aren't familiar with it using vivid visuals. My work is described as fruity, whimsical, and a burst of pop, just like the mixture of a Halo-Halo!

Have you or a close friend ever experienced racism? Describe a time.

Growing up full Filipino, people used to mistake me as Japanese, Korean, or Chinese because my skin was on the lighter side. My family would tell me I need a tan because I'm too light, but my lola would bring me papaya soap so I could whiten my skin. "Mestiza" and "Maputi" were what she called me for being born with this fair complexion. I was told if I could be famous in the Philippines for having whiter skin, as it was the beauty and social status obsession. Darker skin Filipinos were depicted as the poor minority and probably were portrayed on teleseryes (tv





soap operas) as servants. This was how skin was played with in the Philippines back around the 2000s, so I hope things progressed in today's society of embracing our natural beauty. My lola definitely can't stop me now, I'm always taking walks and basking in the sun!

Racism towards me has come up at the weirdest times as well. There was a time when a dude I met on a dating app was trying to get my attention through the DMs. I don't know what he was expecting when he said, "you remind me of the girl from Squid Game, but not as pretty." Umm... SIR??? Was that a compliment? A roast? It didn't help that his Instagram were old high school photos of himself with the n-word as his only captions. What's worse was when he greeted me one morning with, "Good Morning anime waifu." Look, I may be a weeaboo at heart, but that ain't it.

When thinking about the rise of Anti-Asian violence, what feelings or thoughts come up for you?

The first thought that came into my head was the recent shooting in Monterey Park during Chinese New Year. To be honest, I was a bit scared to go back there, but it's not like it could be ignored forever. I love hanging out in Monterey Park, and I wanna support the businesses when I'm around. My mother didn't want me near that area after that incident. She's kind of a helicopter parent, so ignoring her phone calls gets her stressed out when I'm far from home. She fears for my safety more than I do myself. Although I could be a target for a hate crime, I worry for older/elderly Asian Americans who are unable to protect themselves. It's tragic to hear when an innocent Asian bystander is attacked out of nowhere and for no reason.

What are your hopes for the AAPI community this year?

I'm hoping to see more W's for the AAPI community! Whether it's visual or performing art, politics, music, food, etc, we are definitely inspiring a younger generation of Asian Americans out there.

UNTITLED

by Ann Li

Accepting your own skin is undeniably difficult for anyone, but as a biracial individual growing up in America, it has been found to be extremely challenging. To blindly follow suit with the “love yourself” messaging, fueled by the notion that there is a myriad of types of beauty, is nearly impossible and often feels dishonest when there is an inherent conflict between Western and Eastern beauty standards for mixed-race women as we have two archetypes with which we must grapple.

This has been a common theme my whole life— my mom, from Eastern Europe, has fair skin and soft strands of hair the color straw, whereas my dad looks like he has a suntan year-round with tufts of black hair. I don’t look like either parent; as I am Serbo-Croatian, Chinese, Jewish, but not fully one or the other. All three, yet none at the same time.

Because of this, I am yet to meet a peer of mine who resembles myself. Or really anyone who shares my features. And that is somewhat understandable— my nose awkwardly limbos between races and my face results in some sort of hodgepodge of Western and Eastern features.

Although this visual scrapbook was always confusing for myself growing up, it was apparently much more confusing to other people. Very quickly, I grew tired of requests to translate languages I had never spoken for strangers and being asked of my heritage, then the bombardment of guesses. Native American, Pacific Islander, Hispanic. Then, when corrected, there was always someone who

would deny one half of me, and someone else denying the other half, because somehow, I failed to match the ingrained expectations that others seemed to be obsessed with finding in actuality.

And that’s one thing I’ve learned to accept— I will never be adequate to both the strangers who feel puzzled by my appearance and to those who fall within the confines of my own identity who sense some element of otherness. I grew up highly critical of my appearance and fantasized about the changes I would have possibly made. I remember confessing to this, a sentiment that nearly broke my dad’s heart, as I continued to infantilize him in my youth for being too Oriental; a thought that breaks my own heart now.

Beauty ideals for women are already difficult enough to deal with, but then adding the social condition of racial expectations makes it nearly cruel. I expect that other mixed-race people experience the same phenomenon of feeling like they cannot fulfill enough of either ideal to which they are compared. It will never be easy to deem myself “pretty,” as there are simply too many divergent targets to hit in order to achieve this characterization. But I believe now is as good a time as ever to reevaluate the targets to which we confine ourselves.

Learning to no longer scrutinize my physical appearance comes from understanding how we are culturally tricked into believing that Western features are the epitome of beauty, which happen to be the direct product of a confluence of uncomfortable factors— including a history of war, Westernization, an unforgiving media, and unattainable beauty standards.

And I may not be deemed pretty in a traditional sense, but I truly love my features. My appearance happens to be an even blend of my culture, and my face serves as a physical reminder to myself of my family’s immigration story, one that is not possible in many other countries. I happen to be pretty humorous, pretty ambitious, and pretty joyful. The word should hold meaning beyond such strict cultural standards, and to me, these characteristics more holistically encompass what it means to be pretty as a biracial woman.

ANN LI

What do you love about your culture that is understated?

Maybe not understated, but the notion of evil eye in both Serbian and Jewish cultures is something that I love (both in that I believe in it and that I find it humorous as well). Like in Serbia, it's considered bad luck to host a baby shower, and calling a newborn ugly is actually good luck, which is just hilarious. That, and my grandmother would very lovingly spit on my forehead after every compliment to prevent me from becoming vulnerable to evil eye. I also find this kind of superstition to be consistent with how a lot of Asian-American families operate: keep your head down, don't be too proud, and never boast your success. In small ways, I think this promotes gratitude, which I find very sweet.

Does your culture ever influence your work? If yes, how? If no, what does?

Yes, definitely. I think everyone's culture influences their work, whether they're aware of it or not in the sense that culture shapes how you see the world. Even American culture! Which we all have to a degree by living here, but we are so quickly to discredit it as "real" culture. In obvious ways, I think culture influences the things I write about, especially when thinking of my sense of self and my family.

Have you or a close friend ever experienced racism?

Describe a time.

Yes, of course, in the small ways we experience microaggressions from our peers, colleagues, and even strangers. I will say just once I experienced a blatantly racist and almost violent encounter on the subway in Toronto. It was just filled with yelling, eye-pulling, mock Chinese, and eventually being physically hit. I think we imagine all the kinds of heroic things we would do in a situation like this but I just found myself crying and sitting there. The public humiliation of it all makes it hard to think about, so I try not to often.

When thinking about the rise of Anti-Asian violence, what feelings or thoughts come up for you?

It's a very visceral feeling that I can't really articulate other than fear and disgust. So many victims of Anti-Asian violence are already vulnerable in that they're elderly, which just makes these incidents especially cruel.

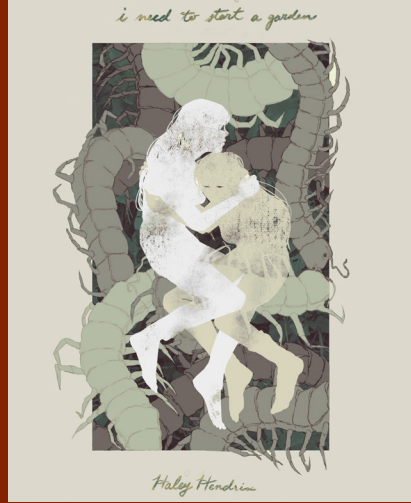


What are your hopes for the AAPI community this year?

For some of the older members of our community, I hope to see them continue to grow away from the model minority myth and their belief in it. I think an older generation of AAPI individuals really do believe that material success will protect them from racism or even the delineation of being a person of color, but some of the success we experience has shown to be more harmful than beneficial. It's also interesting to see how this generation's obsession with defying even being considered a person of color in America through achieving educational and financial success is then manifested politically, as more Asian-American neighborhoods are turning red. It's delusional in that these administrations have no care for our well-being, which is evident in how Anti-Asian violence is underreported and documented. I hope that older members of our community can overcome some of the pride that prevents us from finding more acceptance and safety.



ARLENE TOMISTA

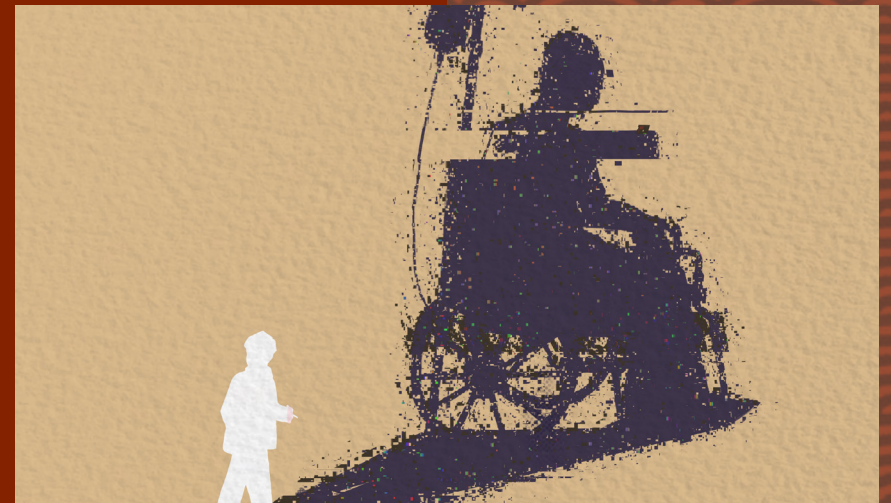


What do you love about your culture that is understated?

I didn't know much about Filipino culture growing up and even now I think I still don't know enough to determine what is underrated. Prior to college, I've only ever had limited knowledge on the topics I thought were interesting like Filipino mythology, but not how it came to exist or why. I eventually came across an artist who made drawings of the indigenous religious deities prior

to Spanish colonization. From then on and throughout college, I began reading about the indigenous communities within the Philippines, the history of colonization, years of dictatorship, and the severe economic disparity. And with each new piece of information sets off a flurry of memories from when I was little. Staring into my bowl of rice as I'm lectured to be grateful, rubbing papaya soap into my skin, Mama's stare as she told me of Lolo's (Grandfather) death. Why these specifically relate, I am unsure. But I remember them.

There are over 100 dialects in the Philippines, yet I never learned one of them. My mom said she wanted to be better in English as her accent was often ridiculed by her coworkers, so my younger brother and I were never raised with it. However, there is a phrase I remember often. 'Bahala na,' which loosely translates to 'whatever happens, happens,' or 'it's in God's hands.' It is a phrase which carries both historical weight and defines the socio-cultural value of most Filipinos...I also remember my mom rephrasing it as 'Bahala ka', which can mean 'you're on your own' or 'do what you want,' and always exuded with a breath of annoyance. At some point, we couldn't eat with her and her boyfriend anymore. "He gets angry when he



sees you,” she said. Gradually there were no more words in passing, no more food shared, and it was always like that until the day she died.

Childhood and adolescence was mostly met with either invisibility, bullying, asian stereotypes or a fetishized, two-dimensional exoticism. I often felt ugly, meek, stupid and truly believed that only moviestar-quality-people could achieve anything as that was often presented on screen, until coming across ‘Paper Heart.’ The movie starred Charlyne Yi, a Korean/Filipino-American Actor. They were not a diversity quota, the stereotype minority, best friend or frenemy. They were the protagonist and a significant contributor to the film in terms of plot, musical composition and production where the clever integration of hand-made puppets amplified the visual storytelling. The movie does not embody my culture, however seeing this multi-faceted person who portrayed this multi-dimensional character on screen made me feel like I can be beautiful (as narcissistic as it sounds) and that I can achieve something. That I can do what I love, I just have to try. And despite my lack of confidence and all my fears for the future, I still really want to try.

The language, the food, the family – these were key staple values that significantly represented what it means to be Filipino and for a long time I couldn’t understand any of it while growing up. I do not remember what my mother looks like but I will replicate her dishes, replacing where her affection was missing with my own. I am older now, still not confident, but am able to rely on my found-family for unconditional love and for that I am always grateful. And though I do not understand my culture’s language, I take both phrases with me, doing what I want while embracing the uncertainty.



