Melting Pots, Witches’ Cauldrons: the Reclamation of American Narratives

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 Bringing Iranian food from home to elementary school was a welcome departure from the usual peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Ghorme sabzi - an herb, meat, and red bean stew served over rice - was my favorite Persian dish, but as my first grade self took to eating this special meal, feelings of belittlement replaced my former joy. “Ew!,” “That doesn’t look like food”, and “Are you seriously going to eat that?” swarmed into my ears. My peers’ reactions told me that I should be ashamed of my food. Almost instinctively, I built a story that would help me eat my lunch without feeling small or wrong: “This is witches’ stew. I’m a witch,” I said. I shrouded myself in this narrative, like a cloak that could warm me, veil me, and ward off the harmful words rampant on the playground. It isn’t surprising that I took to stories in my time of crisis; I live in a nation that does the same. America is built on narratives, using stories as a tool to uphold ideologies, protect its values, and shape its identity. My experience at lunch stands in contrast to the prevalent American narrative of The Melting Pot, which aims to paint a celebratory vision of immigrants and their integration to the United States. The narrative which failed me urged me to construct my own identity; despite America’s attempt to other me, I made space for myself in its story.

“The Melting Pot” metaphor used to characterize America as a nation welcoming of immigrants refers to metal, but many envision the term in relation to food, with ethnicities as ingredients in the dish that constitutes America. The connection between immigrants and food is palpable, as a culture’s cuisine and customs around food are distinctive. Even Schoolhouse Rock recognizes the salience of the food-centered rendition of the Melting Pot narrative; “Lovely Lady Liberty/ with her book of recipes,” a woman sings. “Ooh, what a stew, red, white and blue,” the song continues (Lieberman). Indeed, my green stew didn’t fit neatly into the constraints for what constitutes a good immigrant in America, or second generation immigrant in my case. The
Melting Pot narrative ultimately upholds white supremacy in that it serves to “naturalize histories of genocide, slavery, racialized patriarchy, and economic exploitation as necessary moments of national consolidation” (Luibheid, 37). I was the kid with a unibrow eating food you’d never see in a white household; America’s status as a “nation of immigrants” did not change the fact of my non-whiteness, and so I was “other” and unwelcome. Even the educational children’s tune put out by Schoolhouse Rock maintained whiteness as a measure of productive immigrants; when the song says that “America was founded by the English/ But also by the Germans, Dutch and French,” it still fails to include non-white people in its vision (Lieberman). What most viscerally made me grasp that my Persian identity was at fault with my American identity were the manifestations of anti-immigration ideology I heard on the news or in everyday language which labeled the immigrant as “alien.” I had internalized the ideology that “produces registers of legitimate and illegitimate entrants” (Luibheid, 36), an ideology which rests on the equation of “citizenship with whiteness” (Luibheid, 37). By calling myself a witch, I alienated and othered myself, appropriating the ideologies intended to harm me in order to protect myself.

It seems paradoxical that by othering myself into the category of “witch,” I was also protecting myself, carving out a space in which it was safe for me to engage with my identity. But examining the ideology of citizenship and what it means to belong in America necessitates my narrative. Berlant writes of citizenship that “in return for cultural, legal, and military security, people are asked to love their country and to recognize certain stories” (11). However, buying into the Melting Pot narrative did not afford me something as simple as being able to eat my ghormeh sabzi without feeling small. The benefits and implementations of citizenship are not constant; instead, “historical conditions of legal and social belonging have been manipulated to serve the concentration of economic, racial, and sexual power in society’s ruling blocs” (Berlant,
11). While the scope of citizenship has gradually increased over time, American citizenship’s original prioritization of the white male prevails. Despite being a United States citizen, the nation does not protect my body. While white men are afforded protection, the rest of us are not protected but controlled by the state’s legal policies and social values. Food is, on a basic level, what we put in our bodies and enables our bodies to function. As such, the policing of the food I ate reflected the underlying hegemonic ideologies which seek to police my body. “You are what you eat” is a common mantra; erasing Persian food from my diet would erase my Persianness, and the introduction of more American food would enter me into cultural citizenship. Within the Melting Pot narrative is the false promise of acceptance, as acceptance is only arrived at through the displacement of certain cultural artifacts or objects such as ghormeh sabzi. As such, by finding a way to continue eating my food, undeterred by the comments of my schoolmates, I affirmed my own citizenship. My witch narrative afforded me the safety and protection promised but not given to me by America.

In addition to ideologies surrounding immigration and citizen, gender cannot be ignored in the construction of my witch narrative. The Melting Pot narrative does not include a discussion of gender in its “nation of immigrants,” and it precisely the absence of gender that necessitates its investigation. If the right of non-white people to inhabit space in America is questioned, the right of non-white females to inhabit space is doubly attacked. It is no accident that girls are expected to be thin and take up minimal space. As Douglas notes, “The fact that Jackie Kennedy’s foot would have fit into Cinderella’s size 4 ½ glass slipper seemed highly symbolic at this moment in history” (347). Feelings of smallness and belittlement are inextricably linked to being socialized as a girl, and that is why I responded to those feelings by claiming I was a witch. A witch embodies a counter to traditional gender ideologies -- women
targeted as witches centuries ago were widows; they had agency without men in their lives. To me, a witch identity was protection from the ideas about being a girl that I wanted to avoid -- dressing a certain way, playing certain games. Being a witch was not being the right kind of girl, it was being a weird girl and embracing that. A witch self-determines their identity, lives unapologetically, is proud of their appearance and body even if it isn’t what others expect, speaks their mind, takes up space, or simply eats lunch without feeling small or wrong. I did not leave the lunch table to isolate myself in a corner; I fully inhabited the space I was taking up.

Gender often predicates the way in which we experience other ideologies; for example, while a man and woman may share a race, their racialized experiences can also be gendered and therefore quite different. The intersection of gender with experience of ostracization due to my distinctively ethnic food illustrates the intensification of my need to access protection and safety.

Narratives which exclude lead to the creation of new narratives; I turned the Melting Pot which left out gender into a witch’s cauldron, which synthesized and safeguarded my experience.

I find it fascinating that “melting pot” and “witch’s cauldron” conjure the same image in my mind. I believe this speaks to the entanglement of the narratives of marginalized communities and the hegemonic narratives they respond to, showing that my experience was act of reclaiming. A large part of the power in reclamation is its reminder of the past, holding up our history and demanding progress. In response to a narrative that wants to “melt” me and bring my identity into formlessness, I actively formed my own safe space through narrative. The term “melting pot” was popularized through the work of playwright Israel Zangwill in 1908. He himself was a Jewish immigrant, emphasizing the role of immigrants and other minority communities in creating and constructing narratives. The stories oppressed people construct are born out of necessity: a need to be safe and to have a place within American society. In
Zangwill’s case, his work made room for interethnic love to shape, and he put language to the assimilation that characterized immigrant experiences. Narratives are tools, and as such, they can be molded to serve various purposes.

Today the Melting Pot narrative does the work of complacency and erasure, but immigrants and their children are responding to the harm this does by propelling their voices and building their own narratives, as shown through my experience eating ghormeh sabzi as a first grader. I restructured ideologies around immigration, citizenship, and gender into my own identity and narrative. Narratives are necessitated; we need them as tools, and so when certain prevailing narratives harm or erase us, we create narratives that empower us. It is important to know that the experiences which predicated my narrative are specific; as a second generation Middle Eastern immigrant in a post-9/11 world, my experiences are different than first generation immigrants, and those from other regions. While the act of reclaiming is powerful, it also raises complicated questions: What does it mean when both America and I use the same strategy of narrative to build our identities, that I am using tools that can oppress? Ultimately, reclamation houses the past and the future by simultaneously reminding of history and inciting change, making it an essential tool for progress.

WORKS CITED

