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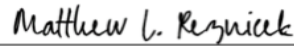
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BE OUR GUEST -
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CONTEMPORARY MULTIETHNIC LITERATURE

By

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A (THESIS/DISSERTATION)

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the literary representation of the international student in two different novels to uncover the true nature of the US's "hospitality" from the Cold War Era until now. To demonstrate this, I use Derrida's framework of hospitality, close readings of Susan Choi's novel *The Foreign Student* and Moshin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and I rely on previously published research on how the US has used international student over the years. I use Susan Choi's novel as an illustration of the US's use of international student to spread American Imperialism to third world countries. I use Moshin Hamid's novel to illustrate how international student are only esteemed in terms of their economic value to the country. Finally, I share my own experience in a non-fictional creative essay. Choi's protagonist, Hamid's protagonist and I share some similarities amongst which the fact of all being international students who stayed in the US during a crisis, namely during the Cold War and after the Korean War, after the 9/11 attacks and during Covid-19. Additionally, all three of us have experienced the US's "benevolent hospitality" narrative and we all became disillusioned with it.

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother who I have not seen in almost two years because of Covid-19 but who has nevertheless always been there for me. I would also like to dedicate this work to all international students in the US.

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

-Nelson Mandela

I don't know if I can continue suffering like this just because I want to live in America.

- Imbolo Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*

I grew up in Belgium lulled by American movies and TV-shows dangling bells and whistles about the American way of life. When I first arrived in the US as an undergraduate exchange student at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, everything seemed so wonderful, so exciting, so new and exotic. It felt like anything and everything was possible. I liked the way classes were taught, it felt like my voice actually mattered, like the teachers were actually interested in what I had to say. My foreignness, evident every time I opened my mouth, made me stand out, and I would sometimes take advantage of it as I was very aware that I could use my “cute accent” in some devious ways. For example, I would sweet talk my way into getting free cookies at my campus’s restaurant or I’d sometimes exaggerate my accent to seem less proficient

in English than what I really was for I knew that a foreigner's lack of proficiency in English was sometimes mistaken for a lack of knowledge on things. Thus, I would use this stereotype to my advantage to get me out of bad situations like when I got caught trying to get into a dance club with my friend who was using a fake ID because he was not yet twenty-one. I experienced all the good and not much of the bad during that one semester. However, when I came back to Creighton University for my master program, I was over the excitement of discovering everything for the first time and started to see what I had been blind to up until then. I started seeing more issues with the American way of life I had been idealizing.

It started when I experienced little health issues. I have a very weak immune system and often get sick which is a real problem in America considering how ridiculously expensive healthcare can be if you don't have an insurance. Luckily, I got the student insurance but that only provided basic coverage. Once, I got really ill on a trip to Colorado and had to go to the ER. When I got the bill, I almost fell off my chair. My fellowship provided me with a little monthly stipend, but I quickly understood I would have to find a way to get more money as I realized how many bills I had: electricity, water, internet, rent, insurance and food. As I talked with my international advisor about getting a second job, she told me international students were not allowed to work off campus and could only work up to twenty hours a week during the semester and my fellowship accounted for all of those twenty hours. I had to ask my parents to pay my rent in order to be able to cover all my other expenses. During Summer, I was allowed to work up to 40 hours a week, but I would usually go back home in that time. However, when the Covid-19 crisis hit, I realized I would not be able to go back home because of all the travel bans. Since my fellowship did not provide me with a stipend during Summer, I had to start thinking about how to make an income to survive. The only place I was allowed to work at on my F1 visa

was campus, but the latter was closed because of the sanitary crisis. So, there I was, stuck in another country without any income, nor any way of getting a job. Fortunately for us, my international friends and I were lucky enough to be welcomed to my American boyfriend's family farm in Missouri where we were offered a good bed and enough food to last us the whole quarantine. It is during that time that I started thinking about the actual lack of rights protecting international students. We are in the US on a non-immigrant visa, stuck in-between, not yet full-time immigrants but not simple guests either as we are bound to the US through a visa contract which allows us very few rights but forces us to comply with a ton of obligations.

When I walk on campus, I am struck by the number of banners promoting my university's diversity. Every advertising board promoting the virtues of my school features at least one "diverse" student. I once wondered where all those students came from as, when I looked around campus, I can't say its diversity was its most striking feature. One of those banners read how the campus's diversity was an asset for students as it better prepared them to live and work in an increasingly globalized world. Now, that, I do agree with. The benefits of diversity for American Universities have actually been proven in the court of law in the case opposing Barbara Grutter to Michigan State's law school. Barbara Grutter is a white American woman who sued Michigan State for racial discrimination. As an applicant with a 3.8 GPA and an extremely high LSAT score, the least we can say is that she was not pleased when she did not get accepted into Michigan State's law school. She claims that her race played in her disfavor in the selection process. It is true that Michigan State's law school's guidelines clearly state that race plays a factor in their selection process, framing this as an affirmative action to counter institutionalized racism and promote equality. During that case, Grutter comments on briefs submitted by corporations on the very real benefits of diversity: "These benefits are not

theoretical but real, as major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas and viewpoints” (Chu 330). One way to get American students exposed to diverse people in order to become better American employees on today’s global market is to have international students on campus to make it more “diverse”.

Universities used to talk about “affirmative action” when promoting the idea of accepting people from many different cultural backgrounds, however nowadays they recasted what they used to call “affirmative action” as “diversity”. Chu writes “that the shift from ‘affirmative action’ to ‘diversity’ (or the recasting of affirmative action as diversity's tool) is significant”, explaining that “where ‘affirmative action’ acknowledged the discriminatory foundations from which it emerged, ‘diversity’ is not so much a remedy as a vague good” (537). Thus, if universities seek diversity by welcoming international students, those students can be seen as just “vague goods” which benefit American universities, American businesses and American society. But who exactly in American society profits from this diversity? Chu states that

The “compelling interest” in diversity, in other words, is that of the white majority and of government, corporate, and military institutions. Having particular minorities in particular communities in particular ways makes those communities more valuable for “society” in a way fostered by the use of race as a market differential driving democratic capitalism in the first place. But if the dominant group has been and continues to be white people, “diversity” means making the community in question more valuable for white people rather than, as in “affirmative action,” justice for non-white people. (Chu 537)

It is interesting to note that currently the most diverse places in America are the Army and carceral institutions. Logically, if the dominant group is and stays white Americans, “diversity”

won't profit actual diverse people and populations but rather the white majority. In this system, universities act as parastatal agents who use diversity as a way to profit the American market. They are institutions created *by* white people *for* white people.

Most of previously published research on international students in the US take a psychological or sociological perspective but very few have taken a literary one. For the most part the international student stays an elusive and transitory figure in the cultural imaginary. With this work I intend to show that the US only welcomes foreign students and immigrants insofar as the country benefits from it in a way which largely disregards the immigrant as a person and recasts them as a commodity in a capitalist system to profit the Empire. I do by examining Susan Choi's *The Foreign Student* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, to think about how the literary representations of the international student provide insights into the ostensible "hospitality" the US extended to international students from the Cold War Era until now. The Korean War is often referred to as the "Forgotten War" in the US because of the national amnesia about it. Jodi Kim compares the international student to the Korean war in an analogy highlighting how both are "an inscrutable object requiring constant translation or production of knowledge about itself" which contributes to making them forgotten "in the American popular imaginary" (283). I argue that the international student is "America's forgotten immigrant" because they precisely represent the histories of colonialism and neoliberalism that the United States wants to disavow. I will also use Derrida's framework of hospitality, a close reading of two different novels, and previously published research on how the US has used international students over the years.

Why did I choose to analyze the welcome extended to international students using the framework of hospitality? First, I think about the terminology international students use to refer

to the country where they are studying, they call it their “host” country. This directly involves them in a host-guest relationship with that said country. Foreign students come to the country on non-immigrant visa, called F1 or J1 visas. If they are not considered immigrants, it seems logical to think of them as “guests”, or at least as transitory figures in-between immigrant and guest. In this work, I’ll rely heavily on Derrida’s notion of Hospitality to analyze what kind of welcome international students receive, and have been receiving, in the US. Derrida distinguishes between two kinds of hospitality: *absolute* hospitality and *conditional* hospitality. He defines absolute hospitality as follows

Absolute Hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.) but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida, 25)

Later in his work, Derrida states that there can be no hospitality if it is not absolute hospitality. In his philosophy, a welcome can only be called “hospitality” insofar as it does not expect anything in return of their guest. As illustrated by the Grutter VS Michigan State’s law school case discussed in previous paragraphs, it is clear that the US, and in this case American universities specifically, expect something in return of welcoming international students. Insofar as diversity is used to profit the market, welcoming international students and offering them an American education cannot be seen as an act of benevolence nor of “absolute hospitality” according to Derrida’s definition, since the latter entails welcoming the guest without asking anything in return, be it the guest’s name or their intentions. In those terms, hospitality is the welcoming of the other without any knowledge of who the other is nor what their intentions are and without

expecting any benefit in return. Thus, if as Chu and Grutter state, diversity is used as a commodity generating benefits for universities and for American corporations who need diversity to adapt to an increasingly globalizing market, universities welcoming international students cannot be seen as an act of hospitality, nor as an act of pure benevolence promoting affirmative action. In this thesis, I theorize that according to Derrida's definition of hospitality, what the US offers the international student is "interested hospitality" at best or more accurately a business contract in which the US, has all the power over the international students, and more generally, over immigrants' professional and personal lives.

To show how the US has been benefitting from welcoming international student from the Cold War until now I'll look at two different novels and at my own personal experience. This work is divided into three chapters. The first chapter looks at Susan Choi's *novel The Foreign Student* which tells the story of Chang, a Korean man who, after helping America as a translator during the Korean War, comes to the US as a foreign student on a scholarship offered by a Christian charity. The second chapter analyzes Moshin Hamid's *novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, in which the protagonist, a Pakistani man called Changez, tells the story of his life in the US to an American stranger during a meal in Lahore. My last chapter is a personal non-fictional essay about my own experience in the US as an international student. Chang, Changez and I share some similarities amongst which are the facts of being an international student in the US and being in the country during a time of crisis. Chang was in the US after the Korean War and during the Cold War, Changez experienced the 9/11 attacks and the period of securitization of the state following it and I lived in the US during a pandemic. Another thing we all have in common is that the three of us have been on the receiving end of America's "benevolent hospitality" and we have all been, in one way or another, disillusioned by it.

First, let's start with Susan Choi's novel *The Foreign Student*. In her novel, Choi dismantles the US narrative of the Korean War which tends to portray America as the benevolent hero of the story who went to Korea to protect the population from the evil that was communism, even when no one actually asked them to do so. Choi's protagonist, Chang, explains that, after deciding to split the peninsula after liberating Korea from the Japanese colonial rule, the US stayed in South Korea and "went to great length to assure Koreans that they weren't an occupation government but just a facilitating presence" helping the country during its "period of transition" (164). Choi's novel narrates what Chang sees during this period of "transition": "everywhere the Japanese disappeared from their buildings," there was a "surreal flood of American things", and things like "Coca-Cola arrived, and Budweiser, and American trash became the stuff that held the city together" (69). This shows how the US started to export their product, culture, and way of life in Korea as soon as they got rid of the Japanese, using the concept of benevolence to justify what looks more like cultural hegemony. In his essay on the Korean war, Daniel Kim mentions recent studies of the Cold War which argue that the US's "containment strategy" of communism has actually quickly been replaced by an "integration strategy" which has targeted developing Third World countries. He writes, "The American aim was the integration of Third World subjects into the political ideology of liberal democracy and of their economies into a world-capitalist system presided over by the US. Achieving it would require winning the war of hearts and minds in places like Korea" (D. Kim 555). The US framed their involvement in the Korean War as part of their "containment strategy" aimed at containing the great evil that was communism making sure to systematically demonize communism, using examples of Stalin's and Mao's cruelty, and by doing so portrayed themselves as the white savior who would save other countries from this terrible evil. Interestingly, fighting this great

evil everywhere around the world allowed for an unprecedented expansion of US imperialism. The US used benevolence as a soft power to establish imperial domination over third world countries. Through this process, America managed to recast what was, in all instances and purposes, colonialism, as benevolence. By hiding behind this notion charged with positive connotation, the US government exonerated itself from all responsibility when something bad happened, calling it unfortunate “collateral damage”, and using it as an example of how much more needs to be done in order to avoid this damage from happening again.

After the War and during the Cold War, the US was very favorable to international students and encouraged the exchanges between countries as exemplified by the adoption of the 1961 Cultural Exchange Act, which recognized the importance of foreign students in the US. In its great benevolence, it even allowed some Korean students, like Chang, to “be integrated into the American population”, but only “as long as they are properly educated into the American way of life” (D. Kim 555). However, this attitude had less to do with humane values like hospitality, equality and fostering international amity than it had to do with the US’s plan to expand American imperialism abroad, a plan in which international students became America’s pawns. America attempted to expand American imperialism in third world countries by Americanizing foreign students through education and then sending them back where they came from to spread the word about how great America is. One might wonder if in such a case we can still talk about hospitality at all or if this is more of a political brainwash. I term this “interested hospitality”. During those years, universities acted as parastatal agent (O’Mara 588). One thing that the US did not account for is that those students would not want to go back at all and would wish to stay in the US. After spending years over here, being taught to love America, making new friends, building a new life for themselves, it is hard to blame foreign students for wanting

to stay. Additionally, most of the students who came to the US during the Cold War, including Chang, did not come to pursue the American Dream but rather to escape their own country which had been devastated by the Cold War fought by America in their land. As they were refused the title of refugee, they came under other pretexts. Their coming over here is a direct consequence of the US's presence over there. Chang's, and many other Korean immigrants' presence in the US is a direct consequence of American imperialism in Asia. As more and more international students decided to stay, they lost their utility to the state and thus were confronted with growing hostility.

Second, let's look at Moshin Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* to further illustrates what happens to international students when they stop being profitable to the country. Changez's story illustrates particularly well Cantwell's notion of "academic capitalism". This notion refers to a system in which universities compete aggressively for revenues, even when they don't really need more money, and where students are considered as clients. In this new system, Anglo-saxon universities have been competing to attract as many international students as possible as they represent one of the biggest groups of full tuition fee paying students since they don't have access to federally based economic aid, including work programs, and often have to pay oversea fees. On this topic, Cantwell quotes Ziguras who states that "International education has come to be understood as an export industry" (514). The use of the word "industry" clearly shows that international students are not valued as people anymore but only as commodities generating profit. It is understandable that institutions need to make profit to stay open but when your sole goal is to always generate more money, you lose track of the lives and the humans behind that monetization. Should an institution not be all about educating minds and less about making profit? In this kind of capitalistic system, international students are not seen as

people anymore but as profit generating commodities in a business deal. “As Reisberg (2012) from Boston College’s Center for International Higher Education explained, efforts to recruit international students felt ‘a lot like a business transaction with the expectation of a good ROI (return on investment)’” (Cantwell 515). Foreign students have very little rights in the US, they don’t have the same rights as immigrants but have as many, if not more, obligations and restrictions making life in this country hard for them.

This profit-driven hospitality is very far from Derrida’s concept of “absolute hospitality”. Actually, the term “hospitality” does not seem fitting in this situation as it is more of a contract which should be mutually beneficial to both parties. Hamid’s protagonist, Changez, comments on the contract he entered in with the US as an international student:

We International students were sourced from around the globe, sifted not only by well-honed standardized tests but by painstakingly customized evaluations - interviews, essays, recommendations - until the best and the brightest of us had been identified. I myself had among the top exam results in Pakistan and was besides a soccer player good enough to compete on the varsity team [...]. Students like me were given scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of meritocracy. In return, we were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining.

(Hamid 4)

The word “sourced” once again calls up this image of the international student being used as a commodity that will turn out to be profitable to the country. Changez is allowed to stay in the US, after graduating from Princeton, because he gets an H1-B visa working for a very famous business company. However, when he starts questioning the ethics of what he does in his job and quits, he immediately gets deported and has to leave everything within one week. Immigrants

and international students are only allowed to remain in the country as long as they prove themselves profitable. As international student, Changez was valuable to Princeton because of his diversity which also helped him get the position in the business firm. But, as soon as he loses his job and stops being profitable, he is asked to pack his bags and leave without any regards for the years he spent laboring for the Empire. As Changez starts realizing the conditionality of the hospitality he has been extended, he starts referring to himself as an “indentured servant”, laboring for the Empire, whose right to stay in the country depended on the “continued benevolence of his employer” (Hamid 178).

In academic capitalism, the economic component takes precedence over the humane one and very little attention is given to international students and to who they are as individuals. When Covid hit, Trump threatened to send every international student who took only online classes back to their country because being fully online would mean they have no reason to be in the US. The only reason this did not go through is because Harvard and MIT, supported by 200 other universities, took legal action saying that this would have catastrophic repercussions on the US’s economy. Yet, no one even mentioned the catastrophic repercussion this would have on the international student’s lives. Trump announced that after many students had already made arrangements to stay in the country, paid their rent and tuition fees. Many of those students were stuck in the US, unable to go back home because of travel bans implemented by the government. They were afraid and isolated. The timing of Trump’s memo on his decision was in many ways inhumane and completely disregarded those students as people. Again, this shows how there is little consideration for the international student as a person and how the policies impact their personal life, they are only seen as economically valuable commodities. The visa system is nothing more than a business contract between the country and the immigrant, giving the US, all

the power and leaving the immigrant powerless to replicate to any abuse of power that may occur as there is no work syndicate protecting the rights of immigrants.

Hamid's novel also allows us to dive more deeply into the concept of "absolute hospitality" and the dangers inherent to the unconditional welcome of a guest. From the very first page onwards, Hamid introduces the framework of hospitality by portraying Changez as the host to an American stranger who he invites to dinner in a restaurant in Lahore. The whole novel is written in the form a monologue by Changez, in which he tells the American stranger about his life in the US, about how it started and how it ended. The very first words of the novel are "May I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you" (1). This introduces the framework of hospitality immediately followed by that of danger, thereby portraying the intimate and unavoidable relationship that exist between those two concepts. Derrida writes that absolute hospitality is the radical openness to the unknown, explaining that the host has to extend hospitality without asking any information of its guest nor inquiring about their intentions. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Changez suspects the American of being there to kill him. Nevertheless, he continues telling his story, exposing himself through his narrative to this threatening stranger in a most hospitable manner. He makes sure the American eats and drinks well and takes care of him, he even walks him back to his hotel for his "safety". In a way, Changez can be seen as representing the figure of the absolute host, as envisioned by Derrida, who welcomes the stranger despite suspecting him of wanting to harm him. We have two choices when faced with the dangers inherent to the notion of hospitality, we can decide to invite the stranger into our home at the risk of our own personal security or we can decide to not extend hospitality at all to protect ourselves. However, Baker suggests that neither of those options guarantees our safety as a welcome involves "a leap in the dark" while a refusal would "invite a

haunting” (Balfour 223). In the wake of 9/11, and more generally since 1868, the US chose the second option choosing the security state over its professed value of hospitality and benevolence.

The 9/11 attacks have been used to drastically restrict immigration. It has become increasingly harder to obtain an immigrant or a non-immigrant visa. The fact that one of the 9/11 hijackers entered the Country on a student visa has been used to explain the drastic restrictions implemented on student visas after 9/11. One of those restrictions was the implementation of the new SEVIS program. This system tracks international students from the moment they set foot in the US to the moment they leave. Everything about them is recorded and reported to Homeland Security. In her article “Closed Borders and Closed Minds: Immigration Policy Changes after 9/11 and US Higher Education”, Allison Witt writes:

In the Cold War, international students in the US were assumed to be spies. Now, with the recent passage of the intelligence reform act, they are assumed to be terrorists until they can prove otherwise. All applicants to US colleges are currently subject to interviews at US consulates abroad where they will be expected to prove that they are not intending to immigrate and that they are not intending terrorist action while in the US. Even after this interview, all of the international students are now tracked and monitored throughout their course of study. (2)

The fact that international students are expected to “prove” that they won’t harm the US means that, because of their “otherness”, they are considered guilty until proven innocent. The level of threat an international student poses is not actually decided on personal factors but rather on where they are from. Witt writes that “male students from Arab or Muslim countries make up another large group of delayed applications, as they are all subject to additional rounds of security checks” (2). The government tracks international students through the SEVIS program

which is an electronic database used and updated by American universities for the government in which they have to “enter a few pages of detailed data about the student [...] Then, the university tracks all of the student’s actions for the government, from entry to and exit of the country, course enrollment, address changes, to even personal financial information” (Witt 2). Garnet argues that this kind of surveillance is unconstitutional as it violates the 4th amendments and the ideals on which America was built. In the SEVIS system, American universities work for the State by monitoring every move of international students through their “diversity office”.

But then, knowing all the restrictions international students are subjected to, as well as the extreme surveillance they experience through the SEVIS program, why are international students still coming to the US? Universities in the US do not just sell an education, they sell the American dream and that is something many international students are willing to pay a high price for, not knowing that this dream is not accessible to everyone alike. They believe that the US immigration system is meritocratic one, that if they work hard enough, they will make it in the US, but are unaware of the many restrictive immigration policies standing in their way. The US immigration system portrays itself to be a meritocratic one, but in fact immigration is regulated by many other factors having nothing to do with merit and more to do with race and social class. In her essay, Ellerman shows how the so-called meritocratic system, supposed to decide who is allowed to immigrate into the country and who is not, is nothing more than an illusion. She argues that class might become more important as a factor of exclusion than race, making it easier for wealthier non-white immigrants to come to the US. Being an international student is also very costly as to get the F1 or J1 visa one needs to pay to take many different tests, pay for the appointments at the embassy, for the passport and the visa, for plane tickets and accommodation, and so forth and so on. Both Changez and Chang themselves come from higher

social classes in their own country as Changez says himself he is not poor and Chang's family was one of the few families who thrived under Japanese colonial rule as they were member of the scholar cast, one of the highest casts in Japanese society. To stay in the US after graduation, international students need to get an H1-B visa which new restriction implemented after 9/11 have made very hard to get. It does not only depend on one's merit but also on chance as it is a lottery, showing how far we are from the meritocratic system the US immigration system portrays itself to be. The new restrictions on H-1B visas have made it so difficult to hire foreign workers that most employers don't even want to try anymore even if the international candidate is particularly qualified for the job. While international students invest so much money, effort and time into getting an American education, employers are seldom willing to reciprocate the investment. As McFadden and Seedorf write "the odds of receiving an H-1B visa in the lottery hover around 1 in 3," thus "some employers who formerly were willing to sponsor are no longer interested in taking this chance" (44). They continue by stating that "The cost to the employer and time and paperwork involved in filing for an H-1B visa, without a certainty that it will result in receiving the visa, are also influential factors" (44). Many employers do not want to take a chance on international students because the odds of obtaining an H-1B visa are just too low. It is possible that Changez got his H1-B visa more easily because he got it before 9/11. Colleges promote the American dream to get new international students to come study in their institution and make more money on their back, but when those students graduate from college, they realize that the American dream is not accessible to everyone alike. Immigrants are faced with the reality of all the limitations and restrictions standing between them and their dream. America presents itself as a meritocracy, that's a lie. The truth is that it is a lottery, which is the exact

opposite of a meritocracy. They can study as much as they want, but when they enter the lottery their fate depends on chance.

I would like to conclude this introduction by saying that when I first arrived in the US, I thought that if I just worked hard enough, I would get my H1-B visa and be allowed to continue living my American Dream, but I got disillusioned when I realized how many restrictions and limitations stood in my way. Now, my future in the US which I worked so hard for depends on pure chance. Here, I built a life for myself, met amazing people, fell in love with an amazing man, studied to get a career in an American university, but now I realize that everything I built is fragile. I am an English major and not recognized as very profitable to the country. Economically speaking, I am simply not a good investment. When international students come to the US, they enter into a business contract which turns out to *not* be mutually favorable, since the US clearly gets more out of this deal than the student does. This shows how the US has been, and still is, using international students for their diversity, which is valued as a simple good, and completely disregard those students' personal and political struggles. I used to believe in America's meritocratic narrative that I was sold by American movies and TV-shows. I believed in the American Dream. This is why, like many other immigrants before me, I came here. Now, I am left with a bitter taste in my mouth. I lost faith in the meritocratic narrative. However, I still have hope for things to change. I believe that novels can help us change things by portraying the hardships international students go through. Novels have the power of humanizing a certain group of people, as Chu writes "In 1900, African- American writer Pauline Hopkins could envision the novel as a way of making black people human, a process that depended on the novel's particular ability to produce resonant accounts of the individual and his or her social order" (530). In a similar process, novels featuring an international student as their protagonist

could help make the elusive figure of the international student more humane and by doing so call more attention to the struggle they face in the US. Novels like Hamid's foreground the humane component, which is missing in the academic capitalist theory, and helps the reader get into the mind of an immigrant in the US, understand how they feel and what they are subjected to. If “social inequality is at least in part attributable to the dominant majority's lack of knowledge about - and therefore lack of sympathy for - various minorities and their experiences” (Chu 530), novels telling the story of international students can show how hard it can be for international students in the US and act as an eye opener and call to action. Real change can only be achieved when people start caring about the immigrant’s and international student’s situation. One way to make people care is to tell their stories. Hopefully the narratives I’ll analyze in the next chapters will successfully show that we are more than just economically valuable commodities, we are people with feelings, dreams and hopes of our own.

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Chapter 1

Benevolent Hospitality?

The International Student and American Imperialism in Susan Choi's *The Foreign Student*

Susan Choi's novel, *The Foreign Student*, is one of the very few narratives of the Korean War, also called the "Forgotten War", written by a Korean immigrant in English. Jodi Kim writes "While we certainly have access to histories told from the Korean perspective in Korean and to histories told from the American perspective in English, what is rare is a narrative told from the perspective of a Korean who experienced the war and migrated to the US soon thereafter" (J. Kim 287). Choi's novel fills that narrative gap by using a Korean protagonist who immigrated to the US after the war. *The Foreign Student* tells the story of a Korean foreign student, Chang, who goes to study in Sewanee, Tennessee, where he will meet his love interest Katherine. As the story progresses, we learn more about Chang's experiences during the war. He was a translator for the US army in Korea and suffered a great deal of trauma as he got tortured on suspicion of being a North Korean spy and as he had to hide in his own house for months while it was being occupied by soldiers. Compared to World War II and the Vietnam war, the Korean war has been

given only very little attention. We have many narratives and images from the wars preceding and following the “Forgotten War”, but we have very few documents studying, representing or narrating the events of the Korean war, which is why it is called “forgotten”. But this war had far reaching consequences for America and Korea alike. This war is essential to understand the formation of the Korean American subject and population. “While the Korean War (1950–1953) has been dubbed the “Forgotten War” or the “Unknown War” by Americans, it remains for Koreans and the global Korean diaspora it engendered a defining moment of family and national history” (J. Kim 280). The Korean war has played a central role in the formation of the Korean American subject and population as it has caused a massive exodus of the Korean population to America. The Korean immigrants, who arrived in masses after 1965, just underwent massive losses in a war, which in many ways could be seen as a civil war as we will discuss later, in which the US was more than a little bit involved. Two million Korean lives were lost, which represents more than twenty percent of the prewar population (D. Kim 552). Daniel Kim writes about Choi’s novel that it “engages in complex ways the question of how the remembrance of this historical trauma might figure in the elaboration of Korean American cultural identities” (553). Through an analysis of Choi’s novel, this essay aims to look at the concepts of hospitality and benevolence, and at how these concepts which are often loaded with positive connotations enabled, and sometimes were used to hide, American Imperialism during and after the Korean war and, in some ways, still to this day. We will also look at why it is significant that Chang came to the US on a student visa and how this relates to the US’s imperial project during the Cold War.

The US framed their involvement in the Korean War as part of their “containment strategy” aimed at containing the great evil that was communism. It made sure to systematically

demonize communism, using examples of Stalin's and Mao's cruelty, and by doing so portrayed themselves as the benevolent hero who will save other countries from this terrible evil.

Interestingly, saving other countries from communism enabled "an unprecedented global expansion of the United States. Today, with the acuity of hindsight, one finds more and more reasons to believe that such expansion was actually the first and real priority of the whole operation of containment" (Sumsky 130). It looks like under its mask of benevolent hero, the US was hiding a darker purpose, namely the expansion of American imperialism and global American hegemony. This is hard to reconcile with the principle of benevolence America was preaching. As Sumsky writes, "A benevolent hegemony is a contradiction in terms and by nature cannot be stable and permanent" (140).

One thing that is important to understand about the concept of "benevolence" is that it implies a power-laden relationship. To help someone implies that one has the power to do so and that the one who is being helped is in need. But who is to tell who is in need of help? In the antebellum period the US took it upon themselves to help those they deemed 'needy'. They took this 'benefactor' role because after the two world wars, which left the Old World desolated and broken, they were one of the only countries who had the power to look beyond their self-interest. Faherty writes about the flip side of being the recipient of American benevolence,

Anyone who was cast as "needy" was immediately excluded from being fully recognized as a citizen. As social reformers on all sides of the ideological spectrum projected the need for "Americans" to be benevolent to Native American, African immigrants, and immigrants, among a host of other presumed "needy" classes, antebellum Americans began to imagine the category of "other" as synonymous with subsidy and charity." (Faherty 31)

This still influences America today, as refugees, immigrants and international students alike, who are all seen as being the beneficiaries of American benevolence have to go through many long and difficult processes in order to get the citizenship. It often happens that after going through all these difficult procedures they are still refused the grail of American citizenship.

After defeating Japan and deciding to partition the Korean peninsula, the US decided to “help” Korea by their “facilitating presence” during South Korea’s period of “transition” (Choi 164). Choi’s novel narrates what Chang sees during this period of “transition”: “everywhere the Japanese disappeared from their buildings,” there was a “surreal flood of American things”, and things like “Coca-Cola arrived, and Budweiser, and American trash became the stuff that held the city together” (69). This shows how the US started to export their product, culture, and way of life in Korea as soon as they got rid of the Japanese, using the concept of benevolence to justify what looks more like cultural hegemony. In his essay, Faherty writes about how Ryan’s work exposes “the double-edged nature of benevolence, considering how it was employed to assuage cultural guilt over the national maltreatment and exploitation of “others” while still permitting the re-inscription of hegemony” (Faherty 31).

In his essay on the Korean war, Daniel Kim mentions recent studies of the Cold War which argue that the US’s “containment strategy” of communism has actually quickly been replaced by an “integration strategy” which targeted developing Third World countries. He writes, “The American aim was the integration of Third World subjects into the political ideology of liberal democracy and of their economies into a world-capitalist system presided over by the US. Achieving it would require winning the war of hearts and minds in places like Korea” (D. Kim 555). This contradicts America’s narrative of the Korean War. In this new narrative, America is not the white savior who rescues the needy Koreans who can’t protect

themselves from the communist threat, but rather they become, just like the URSS, a country trying to expand their political and cultural model in Korea by taking advantage of the recent power vacuum created by the defeat and departure of the Japanese colonial regime. With its narrative, America recasted what looks like colonialism as benevolence. This politic of integration can also be seen as working through inviting international students to study at American universities, thereby teaching them the American way-of-life, hoping they will go back to their country with a newfound love for the US and become ambassadors for the American model all over the world.

Choi's novel is best described as a Korean American novel and as post memorial text. As one of the few narratives using a Korean perspective and told in English, Choi's novel offers a new, transnational perspective that has seldom been used before in novels on the Korean War. "*The foreign student* opens up a multivalent historical view of the Korean War that situates it in a transnational framework that is different from the one in which it has traditionally been situated" (D. Kim 551). Making her protagonist, Chang, an international student is the perfect way to achieve this transnational framework. Choi skillfully intertwines Chang's memories of Korea and his present life on a campus in Sewanee while mobilizing the trope of translation to suggest that she herself as the narrator is merely trying to translate Chang's experience of the War. She often hints to the fact that she does not share her protagonist's language and that she is merely trying to describe events that happened to Chang in a language that is not Chang's. In his essay on Choi's novel, Daniel Kim writes: "To think of *The Foreign Student* in this way is to read the novel as translating between the Korean and American historical narratives it fits together fragment to fragment- as drawing its readers toward a larger history of the Korean War that it does not itself flesh out" (570).

Choi's novel suggests that the Korean war is not just something foreign that happened in a distant country, but it is also something that concerns and involves America. "The Korean War is the legacy - as are the wars that took place in the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia - of American imperialism" (D. Kim 559). It is America who originally divided Korea after defeating Japan, something Choi references in her novel: "With two atom bombs days before having leveled Japan, the problem of how to administer Japan's former possession was not the most absorbing, and the time at the table was brief. They chose the thirty-eighth parallel, latitude north. It was on everybody's map" (63). The rushed and condescending language used represents the off-handedness and lack of care displayed by this decision when it was made in real life. Kim writes about the US's decision to split Korea and its far-reaching consequences: "And even as North Korea remains a sensational fixture in the US news media, what gets ignored is America's Cold War intervention in creating a "North Korea" in the first place" (J. Kim 281). In *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe writes about the determinant factors of identity formation for the Asian American community within the US: "Asian Americans emigrating from previously colonized sites are not exclusively formed as racialized minorities within the United States but are simultaneously determined by colonialism and capital investment in Asia" (8). The very existence of the Korean American community in the US is a direct consequence of America's imperialism in Korea, showing once again that the Korean War is not only a Korean narrative, but it is an American one as well, as the US one of the protagonists (or antagonists depending on the viewpoint) of the story.

Chang did not only experience American imperialism in the US, but he already had to endure it while he was in his own country. Chang worked as a translator for the US during the War, he describes his task as "selling the US to Korea" by translating "American news and

American culture, Gershwin and Time and democracy” (Choi 84). This is one of the ways the US hoped to gain the heart of the Korean population in order to expand its hegemony. Sumsky writes about the US’s peculiar way of “benevolently” colonizing Korea: “Playing on the image of benevolence— in fact the term “benevolent assimilation” has become integral to the period’s vernacular—the brand of US colonial rule appeared to be something truly unique” (127). Chang used to work for Hodge, the leader of the US troops, in Korea. The latter decided to change Chang’s name to a more American one, namely Chuck. Nowadays, it is common practice for Asian students and immigrants with complicated names in the eyes of Westerners to choose a new name upon arrival which will be easier to pronounce for Americans. However, in Chang’s case it is harder to understand why he had to change his name from Chang to Chuck as the difference between the two is minimal and as he wasn’t even in the US at the time. When Langston, another American leader, comes to visit Hodge in Korea, he comments on American imperialism, “American imperialism is nothing if not redundant,” Langston said, turning back to Peterfield. “Here you’ve got a young man in possession of one of the very few single-syllable names his nation has to offer - I believe even my photographer could say it - and you’re not content until you’ve renamed him ‘Chuck’” (Choi 90). Although Langston is aware of the absurdity of renaming him when both names are so similar, he keeps calling him Chuck throughout the novel, thereby exercising the very same American imperialism he was so vehemently criticizing.

America’s involvement in Korea still has consequences to this day on the Korean American, and more generally Asian American, population of the US and on how they built and understand their identity. Like most Korean immigrants who arrived after the Korean War, Chang’s presence in the US is a direct result/ consequence of the US’s presence in Korea. Chang

refers to that fact himself in the novel by saying “I’m not here if this doesn’t happen” (50), referring to McArthur Inchon landing and to the presence of the US in Korea. Kim writes about Chang’s presence in the US “Chang’s migration is not a chasing after the “American Dream,” but a running away from the nightmare that is Cold War South Korea”. (290) Knowing that Chang was running from a bad situation in his home country after having helped the US military, one might be right to wonder if Chang did not deserve the refugee status. As most of the Korean immigration that happened after the war is a direct result of the US’s involvement in Korea, a question that rises is: Did the US, who portrayed themselves as so benevolent, not owe Koreans hospitality because of their involvement in the war? Yuh refers to Korean immigrants as “refuge migrants”. Kim writes

Motivated by a psychological need to leave behind the chaos, insecurity, and trauma triggered by the Korean War, refuge migrants are thus significantly different from immigrants who leave their countries in search of better economic, educational, and life opportunities. Yet this refuge migration has not been recognized as such, because it has been legally classified as labor, family, or economic migration. (292)

Those immigrants, just like Chang, did not come to the US seeking the American dream of economic success but rather seeking a refuge from the chaos the US left in their wake.

Over its history, the US has often relied on Asian immigrants to build and sustain itself. “Both in the period from 1850 to World War II and in the period after 1965, immigration has been a crucialloeus through which US. interests have recruited and regulated both labor and capital from Asia” (Lowe 7). In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe explains that the US did not go to fight wars in Asia solely to contain the communist threat or to export American imperialism, but also because it was an economic necessity (18). Immigration laws have always been the site of a struggle between what the economy demands and what the state wants. Lowe phrases it best,

immigration legislation continues to be the site for the resurgence of contradiction between capital and the state, between economic and political imperatives, between the "push-pull" of markets and the maintenance of civil rights and is riddled with conflicts as the state attempts to control through law what is also an economically driven phenomenon. (20)

The state wants to rule over a homogeneous population which shares the same cultures and values as it is easier to control but the liberal economy of the state demands and needs internationalization and globalization of the market. This contradiction between politics and economics was seen recently during the Covid-19 crisis when Trump wanted to send every international student back to protect the American population but was attacked in justice by Harvard and MIT, who were backed up by more than 200 American universities, who said that this would be a disaster for the national economy. In the end, Trump's administration rescinded its law proposal to send all international students who were following only online classes due to the pandemic. The only reason invoked for not sending foreign students back was the economic one, no one cared about the impact this would have had on the international students' personal life. This shows that the international student is less valued as a human than as a profit generating commodity. In her article in which she discusses the case of a student being accepted in Law school because he was diverse, Chu writes that "diversity" is used as "vague good" by Universities and by societies (537). This notion of international student as commodity will be discussed more at length in the second chapter of this thesis.

After the Korean War, the US, in its great benevolence, allowed some Koreans to "be integrated into the American population", but only "as long as they are properly educated into the American way of life" (D. Kim 555). After the War and during the Cold War, the US was very

favorable to international students and encouraged the exchanges between countries, however this attitude had less to do with humane values like hospitality, exchange, equality and fostering international amity than it had to do with American Imperialism. Northern America welcomed many foreign students, just like Chang, in an attempt to expand American imperialism abroad by Americanizing foreign students through education and then sending them back where they came from to spread the word about how great America is. One might wonder if in such a case we can still talk about hospitality at all or if this is more of a political brainwash. I term this “interested hospitality”. The US welcomes students not out of kindness but to achieve their end goal, namely American imperialism. During those years, universities acted as parastatal agent (O’Mara 588). In 1961, the Cultural Exchange Act recognizing the importance of foreign students in the US was passed. Unfortunately, soon after, the US shifted mentality and turned against foreign students. One thing that the US did not account for in their plan, bringing foreign students to the US to Americanize them and send them back to their countries as ambassadors of America, is that those students would not want to go back and would wish to stay in the US. After spending years in the over there, learning to love America, making friends, building a life for themselves, it is hard to blame foreign students for wanting to stay. As more and more international students decided to stay, they lost their utility to the state and thus were confronted with growing hostility.

Choi’s novel does a good job representing the racial positioning of Asian immigrants in America. Daniel Kim writes “*The Foreign Student* is nonetheless deeply concerned with domestic issues: with how Korean Americans are positioned vis à vis whites, blacks, and other Asian Americans and what that positioning reveals about the workings of race in America” (551). Choi’s story happens in Korea and in the South of America. The US has a complicated history of racism and discrimination towards African American and Native Americans. The South, especially, is

known for its history of enslaving African American and fighting to keep slavery during the Civil War. When Chang arrives to America, he discovers a deeply racialized country and has some trouble figuring out where he belongs. His position is best summarized in Daniel Kim's words "Is yellow, black or white?" (565). During thanksgiving break, Chang is invited to stay at his roommate's, Crane, house. Crane's father is a Grand Dragon in the KKK. Crane is clearly inviting Chang in the hope of provoking his father, he says: "They might mistake him for a nigger and hang him or have the sense to see he's not a nigger and not hang him just because of that" (57). The Cranes will actually be pretty polite, although condescending, to Chang, thereby granting him some kind of "honorary whiteness" (D. Kim 564). Chang is obviously uncomfortable at the Crane's. It seems like he is aware that he does not truly belong there and feels the gap between them. During Thanksgiving dinner, Crane's father gives Chang some advice on all "things American": "When you look back, Mr. Ahn, on your first years in America, on your first lessons in things American, you will think of the Cranes. I am giving you white meat and dark. You will develop a preference in time. You may develop a preference right away. If you do, exercise it." (Choi 60) This scene portrays Crane's dad as overtly racist towards African Americans. It almost feels like a threat directed to Chang. He is basically telling him to choose sides.

Chang seems to intuitively understand that he does not enjoy the same white privilege his classmates have. He identifies more readily with the black staff working at his university than with his white classmates. Chang tells us how "In his first week, he'd shaken hands with the colored table servant at formal Friday dinner" (15). He continues by telling us how he addressed a black busboy later "as if they were both guests at a surprising and solemn affair" (146). However, during the Winter break, he discovers that he is very different from the all black staff working for the university. When he joins them in the dining hall for dinner, he finds them all

listening to music, talking, laughing and eating, but, when they see Chang enter the room, they seem to feel uneasy. This is when Chang understands that

the desolate interval between the fall and spring terms was a time of simplicity and freedom, and he embodied the force of observation from which they'd expected a reprieve” (Choi 167). To them, Chang is aligned with a whiteness that is “embodied” primarily as a “force of observation” even though he too has been subjected to its discriminating gaze. (D. Kim 564)

When he goes out to eat with Katherine, people stare at them for a while, Chang comments on the situation by saying “They don’t know what to make me” (Choi 37). Asians are in a “racial no-man’s land” (D. Kim 564). Just like all Asian immigrants in America, Chang is forever “in-between”, not black, not white, not completely fitting with any of them. More than that he is simply not American. Black and white Americans are very different and have very different culture, but they do have in common the fact of being American. Freshly arrived immigrant in the country are not. They don’t fit with any of those groups.

Asians Americans are not the only ones feeling stuck “in-between”, this feeling is shared by international students coming to study in the US. International students are not yet full immigrants, they are seen as a sort of transitory figure. They don’t have the same rights as American citizens but have many obligations to the state if they want to keep their visa, they: have to maintain excellent grades, are not allowed to work more than 20 hours a week during the school year, can’t work outside of campus, don’t have access to financial help offered by the State and thus often have to pay the full tuition fees, have to pay to take tests testing their knowledge of English before entering the State, ... In his article *Of Hospitality*, Derrida sees this obligation of learning the host’s language as the first violence upon the guest’s otherness (15). It is interesting

to note that, although the US expects immigrants to learn English, Americans did not bother learning Korean while they were over there. Moreover, they didn't adapt to Korean culture at all and tried to export the American model of military to Korea as illustrated by the following passage of Choi's novel:

And so Hodge decided to build the Republic of Korea its own army. Almost immediately he ran into a problem with words. Korea had its own language for weapons and warfare and soldiers, but the words were attached to Korean ideas, and these were of no use to Hodge. He wanted only the American idea of expedient slaughter, the American idea of order. He didn't know any Korean [...] Hodge meant to imagine an American-style army out of the materials at hand, and what did not fit would be altered by force. In this spirit, Chang didn't adjust things to the names that existed, but adjusted new names to the things. The result was that Hodge's Republic of Korea Army was inarguably American apart from the fact that it consisted entirely of Koreans in oversized uniforms running around yelling things like, "Grab your mechanical-gun-that- shoots-fast and get into the car-with-no-top! (66-67)

While in the US, Chang suffers his fair share of stereotyping, racism and discrimination. When Katherine, Chang's love interest, looks up information in books about Korean culture, the only book she finds is one in which Koreans are grotesquely stereotyped: "Korean ideas of hygiene are almost as negligible as those as Hottentot. The average Korean well is little short of a pest-hole" (Choi 44). Interestingly, his ethnicity seems to be of less interest than his racial identity. In America, all Asians are lumped together regardless of their ethnicity. Lowe comments on this in *Immigrant Acts*, "we're all lumped together, us 'gooks'" (1). Choi represents this "lumping together" of Asian Americans in America very well in *The Foreign Student*. When Chang is on a

bus ride to Chicago, after learning of Katherine's engagement to another man, he meets a little boy whose brother fought in the Korean War. When he sees Chang, he automatically assumes Chang is heading towards Chinatown. When Chang replies he is not Chinese, the kid simply answers, "That's okay" (230), almost as if he meant to say that it did not really matter what country he is actually from. Later on, the kid tells Chang "My brother says you can't tell the difference between gooks and chinks so I am getting a good look at you and when he takes me to Chinatown with him I'll bet I can tell" (232). This resonates with Bebout words "race is not simply an inherent category, but rather one that is ascribed by others" (28). Chang is ascribed the race of Asian. It does not matter where in Asia he is from; he is simply Asian.

Interestingly, it is not only Americans who "lump Asians together" in Choi's novel. When Choi arrives in Chicago to go work in a book refinery, he is approached by a Japanese man who hands him a card with the address of a massage parlor in Little Tokyo. Before he can even realize what language he is speaking in, Chang replies "Thank you" in Japanese (Choi 241). After this encounter, Chang makes his way to Little Tokyo where he decides to rent a room. He is quickly adopted by the local community who give him the nickname "Einstein" because he is always reading. "If these people knew he was Korean, they didn't seem to care. Arriving Filipinos were eagerly courted by Japanese massage-house proprietors, and Japanese teenagers rode the El to Chinatown to work in the restaurants. Old prejudices were irrelevant and unprofitable" (244). With this excerpt, Choi represents what the Asian American community of Chicago is like. However, it would be hard to consider Chang's assimilation in this community solely in positive terms as we know that Chang's fluency in Japanese comes from the colonization of Korea by Japan. Chang and his family actually did pretty well under Japan's colonial rule as they were part of the higher class, the class of scholars. It is only after the fall of the Japanese regime that Chang has to mingle

with the middle class. By doing so, Chang meets his best friend Kim who will end up siding with the communists, while Chang will choose America's side.

With the label of "Asian" comes assumption about Chang's political alignments. In her article in which she analyzes the intersection of race and the notion of biopower as understood by Kant, Chu writes that "Political identity does not equal "race," though it is always biopolitical and thus intersecting with race" (546). On a bus ride from Chicago to New Orleans to go see Katherine after he learns that she just broke off her engagement, Chang is arrested and detained because he is suspected of being a communist. No one else in the bus is arrested, nor even suspected, but because Chang is Asian, he fits the profile of the "Chinese communist". Katherine has to come down to the station to attest that she knows Chang and that he isn't a communist threat. When she arrives, the officers tell her that New Orleans has become a point of entry for Chinese communists and that this is why they suspect Chang of being one of them. Katherine replies that Chang "isn't even Chinese", a short silence ensues during which the officers study Katherine, finally, he asks her, "'are you familiar with the Port Security Program?' 'I'm afraid that I'm not.' 'Are you communist yourself?' 'Me?' Katherine exclaimed, and then they all, even the irritable short sleeved man, burst out laughing, and laughed together a long time while he looked on amazed" (278). The fact that they all laugh at the mere thought of Katherine being a communist represents perfectly how one's race is often taken as a sign of one's political beliefs. We will dive deeper in this topic in the second chapter of this thesis which looks at the story of a Middle Eastern man living in the US after 9/11.

In many ways, Choi's novel can be seen as a post-memorial novel trying to retrieve memories that are not hers but those of the Korean immigrants who arrived in the US before her, like her dad. Choi represents the impossibility of history's retrieval through narrative silence. What

is important is not what is said but what is not. Lowe writes “The ‘past’ that is grasped as memory is, however, not a naturalized, factual past, for the relation to that past is always broken by war, occupation, and displacement. Asian American culture ‘re-members’ the past in and through the fragmentation, loss, and dispersal that constitutes that past” (29). Choi represents that fragmentation really well through her story by giving segments of what happened in Korea and interweaving it with the present in the US. Showing the intimate relationship between Korean and American history. Through her trope of translation, she also represents loss in a way, as much gets lost in translation. She makes it clear that she does not speak Chang’s language and by doing so she creates that sense of dispersal and loss that defines Asian American history. Choi herself is a second-generation immigration which means that, although she knows that her dad immigrated to the US due to the desolation the Korean War left in its wake, she will never be able to fully understand what first generation immigrants like her dad went through. Throughout the novel, she never lets us forget that this is in fact just a novel, and not a historical account, by using the trope of translation to make it clear that she does not share Chang’s language and is thus representing his thoughts in a language that is not his. She is “translating” his thoughts to the best of her ability but as a reader we can feel that there is a lot we can’t understand, and which remains out of our grasp.

Chang never goes in depth about what happened to him during the War, thereby contributing to the irretrievability of the Korean war’s narrative. When Chang comes to the US, he decides to leave his past behind. More than leaving it behind, he tries his best to forget, creating a new American self. On one side there is his Korean side named Chang and on the other there is Chuck, his American self. Chang expresses this dichotomy he feels in the following passage from Choi’s book,

He could not remember the pain he had felt, as if all that had happened to him had been enacted on another. Although he had witnessed every detail, the pain was as distant from him as the distance between two bodies; the other may be there, in your arms, their length matched against yours, but whatever they feel is darkness. It could be another universe, it could not exist at all. He could not imagine what the other body felt, and so he became another to himself; and after this happened, how could he be close to someone, when he was two people? (317–318)

It is his Korean self who suffered the atrocities of the war and although he can remember what his Korean self went through, he can't feel the pain he used to feel in those moments anymore. To escape the pain, he came to the US and build a new self in the hope of creating of new narrative for himself. When others ask him about the war he answers very vaguely, thereby contributing to making it a “forgotten war” in America. He remembers it acutely. The war had dramatic consequences on his life but when he came to the US, he chose to become Chuck and leave Chang behind so that he would not have to relive the pain he went through.

The way Choi interweaves Chang and Chuck's stories, is a literary representation of the intimate bond linking American history to Korean history. The Korean War is part of American history as much as American imperialism is part of Korea's history. Choi's novel represents the impossibility of fully understanding the Korean War from an American perspective. Jodi Kim writes that Choi's novel offers “an unsettling hermeneutic of the Korean War that does not posit naïve or wholesale retrieval as the desired or even possible corrective to historical and narrative erasure, but rather attends to the war as a complex problem of knowledge production” (281-282). Choi achieves this by using a metafictional trick. One of the conditions for Chang to keep his scholarship, benevolently offered by a Christian association, is that he has to go to different

parishes in his free time to talk about Korea, Koreans and the Korean War. Chang tries to explain the history leading to the Korean conflict by connecting it to the broader history of Asia, its history of colonization, and to the history of American imperialism in general but he quickly realizes the impossibility of the task as he realizes that his American public, and us as readers, would not be able to understand. “The novel suggests that it is precisely because this foreign war—much like the foreign student himself—is an inscrutable object requiring constant translation or production of knowledge about itself that it remains a largely “Forgotten War” in the American popular imaginary” (J. Kim 283). Using this same analogy, the international student could be seen as the “forgotten immigrant” of the US, a transitional figure no one knows much about and no one really cares about. The international student is in-between the status of guest and the status of immigrant. They have none of the rights the guest have, nor any of the rights immigrants have, but have the obligations of both. They have to be profitable to the country, contrarily to a guest who is just visiting, but have none of the rights immigrants have as they are here on an F-1 visa, which is categorized as a non-immigrant visa.

During the presentation Chang has to give on Korea, it is apparent that Americans have a certain idea about what Koreans are like and about what the Korean war is. It is also apparent that there is a huge gap between the idea of the thing and the thing itself. “We are reminded of the gap between MacArthur and the idea of MacArthur, between the Korean War and the idea of the Korean War, between Koreans and the idea of Koreans. In Chang’s lectures, as in the minds of his American audience, the idea of the thing comes to supplant the thing itself” (J. Kim 285). One scene in the novel illustrating particularly well that gap between the idea Americans have of Koreans and what Koreans are really like, is when Chang tells Katherine someone once asked him if Koreans lived in trees. During one of his talks, Chang feels the disappointment of his audience

when he shows the picture of Seoul's very modern European looking railway station. Contrarily, the audience gets very excited about "the image of the farmers, in their year-round pajamas and inscrutable Eskimos' faces..." (Choi 52). Daniel Kim writes that the American audience gets excited seeing those pictures because they want "to see Koreans as a primitive, gentle people worthy of American military protection and to see itself as belonging to a nation that is powerful and benevolent enough to have provided it" (555). Chang himself participates in creating this gap between the idea of Korea and the Korean War and what those are really like by avoiding questions about the War and giving very generic descriptions of his own culture like on page 39 where he explains that "Koreans were farmers, that they enjoyed celebrating their holidays clad in bright costumes, that they were fond of flowers and children—that they were unremarkable, hardly worth the trouble of a lecture" (39). The idea of MacArthur being a hero is certainly far from the reality too. In reality, MacArthur was fired by Truman and the Korean War really was a waste of time as it ended right where it started. Chang uses the same slide in the beginning of his presentation and in the end of it, he only changes the title of the slide from "Korea before the war" to "Korea after the war".

Americans like to see themselves as the benevolent heroes who went to a country in need to save its population from the evil that is communism. They also like to see themselves as the benevolent host offering hospitality to immigrants who have nowhere else to go. Daniel Kim writes that Chang "is apparently regarded as someone who, in coming to America, has been saved from the primitivism that would have otherwise been his birthright" (554). But what does it mean to offer hospitality? Derrida distinguishes two kinds of hospitality: "absolute hospitality" and "conditional hospitality". Absolute hospitality requires the host to open their house to the guest

without expecting anything in return, no questions asked. The host can't ask their guest's name nor their purpose.

Absolute Hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.) but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida, 25)

During the war, the US was Korea's guest, however, the hospitality that the US was given is very different from the one it gave Chang. It is important to understand that there are certain risks relative to extending hospitality (Bell 249). Derrida explains this phenomenon very well by explaining that sometimes the foreigner comes to the host country as a savior, as a legislator, and as a liberator of the host in which case "it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage – and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host. The guest (hôte) becomes the host (hôte) of the host (hôte)" (123-125). It is interesting to note that French uses the same word for guest and host, namely the word "*hôte*", thereby semantically showing how quickly the one can become the other.

During the war, America is South Korea's guest, but the guest ends up becoming the master when it appears that it is the US who actually calls the shots. Although Chang is in his own country, and should thus be the master as well as the host, he ends up working for the Americans, the guests, as a translator. It feels like the US is Chang's master both as guest and host. Generally, the US has a history of coming into other countries as guests, while presenting themselves as liberators and trying to take the power. One of the most recent examples is the presence of the US in the Middle

East in which it has long over-extended its welcome and become an unwanted threatening presence. This white savior complex is best illustrated through Choi's word, "The Americans went to great lengths to establish that they were not an occupation government at all, but a facilitating presence" (164). The problem with America offering its help to Korea is that they never asked the Koreans if they actually wanted their help. By extending their help to the Koreans and calling it "benevolence", America exonerated itself from any responsibilities they have when that benevolence causes "collateral damage". Shaik writes about how the term "collateral damage" is the "euphemism par excellence" (88). Every time something goes wrong or causes harm, America refers to it as "collateral damage" hence exonerating itself from any responsibility as they intention where pure and good since they acted out of "benevolence". Shaik warns us about the impossibility for true justice or accountability in such a system, "If every inequality, every abuse, every infraction is seen as an aberration, as a demonstration of the fact that the order has not yet reached its full potential, are we to hope that this same order will eventually be equal to its own avowed aspirations?" (88). If every time something bad happens, it is just used as an example of how much more work needs to be done and how much more the US needs to help, there will never actually be a way to obtain justice. It is important to ask ourselves if the 'good' we try to do is actually 'good' for everyone involved. In such a justice system, no one can be held accountable for the bad that happened as it comes out of the intention to do good. The bad is used as proof that more "good" needs to be done. This system allowed the US to recast violence and colonialism as benevolence.

Choi's novel is not only an Asian American novel and a post memorial text, but also a romance, which is not without significance. For a long time, America had antimiscegenation laws prohibiting inter-racial marriages. Koshy writes about antimiscegenation laws directly directed

against marriages between Asian men and American white women. She says those laws were implemented as more and more Asian male immigrants were coming to the US to work. America needed the labor force, so the US welcomed many Asian male workers but refused female Asian immigrants as they were not thought of as productive workers. “Unlike other forms of miscegenation regulations, antimiscegenation laws directed at Asian Americans were shaped by a need to police the sexuality of a primarily male immigrant labor force” (Koshy 6). White women who decided to marry outside of their race despite the law were stripped of their citizenship. This racial component complicates Chang and Katherine’s romance. Romances telling the story of inter-racial relationships between Asian American men and white American women are also important because of their productivity rather than their reflectivity. Koshy writes

These narratives are important precisely because they invented and therefore preceded the racialized sexual cultures in subsequent decades attained greater sociological solidity. Myths of white-Asian desire were productive of, rather than reflective of, the sociological reality of white-Asian miscegenation, helping shift the meanings of Asian American masculinity and femininity over the decades. The productivity of these stories derives from their ability to act as an “incitement to desire” through “the dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities. (19)

The stories about White-Asian miscegenation preceded the reality of it. It is through engaging the Americans’ minds and hearts that those novels acted as an agent of change. They recasted the Asian immigrant as a sentimental subject rather than a political one (Koshy 20). These stories showed the Asian subject in a new light and made him more likeable and relatable to the American public by mobilizing the trope of romance to call upon the universal ideal of love.

I would like to conclude by looking at Bolton's essay on the use of the romance genre in stories of colonization in which she cites Sara Suleri who states that "In negotiating between the idioms of empire and of nation, the fiction of the nineteenth-century Anglo-India seeks to decode the colonized territory through the conventions of romance, reorganizing the materiality of colonialism into a narrative of perpetual longing and perpetual loss" (3). Choi's narrative tries to tell the story of a forgotten war, highlighting the impossibility of the task as much of the knowledge about it has been lost and transformed by a narrative constructing America as the "benevolent hero". She uses the figure of the foreign student who is a transitory figure, longing to belong to his/her host country but not yet accepted by the latter as a full-time immigrant. Choi's novel attracts its reader's attention to the intertwining of America's and Korea's history and to how the formation of the Asian American subject should be understood as the legacy of American imperialism in Asia. Choi skillfully represents the impossibility of retrieving the whole story of the forgotten war by using the trope of translation as a representation of this unbridgeable distance that exist between history as how it has been *lived* by Koreans who immigrated to the US and history how it has been *told* by these same immigrants. As Choi tells Chang's story, she reminds her reader in subtle ways of the distance existing between her, the narrator, and her protagonist, Chang, as they do not share the same language nor memories. By using the figure of the international student, Choi posits her story ion a transnational framework, giving her narrative a truly unique perspective. The fact that Chang came to the US as a foreign student is significant as the only ways one could immigrate to the US was for work or for studying, because Koreans were not recognized as refugees. At the time, the US believed that if someone was permitted to come study in the US, like Chang was, one had to feel deeply indebted and grateful to its host country for its "benevolent hospitality". Choi's

novel helps shift the narrative of the Korean war from America's benevolence and recasts it as American Imperialism.

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Chapter 2

The American Dream and Academic Capitalism:

The International Student in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Today, the US affirms that its immigration system is a meritocracy, but it is not. The truth is that it is harder for certain people to get a visa to enter the US depending on their race, ethnicity, or religious affiliations. The risk someone might pose to the nation is not calculated based on the information gathered about that person's life but rather on that person's origin. Michael Perfect writes "Indifferent to the contingent biographies that actually make up the underlying data, risk in its derivative form is not centered on who we are, nor even what our data say about us, but on what can be imagined and inferred about who we might be—on our very proclivities and potentialities" (194). Muslims have been victims of growing racial profiling and discriminatory policies after the 9/11 attacks. After the latter, the US has implemented more restrictive immigration policies than ever before, not only on immigrants but also on those coming on non-immigrant visas like international students. It doesn't matter who the person is or what their motivations to get into the country are because the authorities are not looking at the actual data

about their life but rather at where they are from. As Chu writes “Political identity does not equal ‘race,’ though it is always biopolitical and thus intersecting with race” (546). People with Middle Eastern origins will be more likely to be seen as posing a potential security threat to the nation because of the stereotypical conception that every Middle Eastern is associated with radical Islamist movements like Al-Qaeda. Unfortunately, these stereotypes gained momentum in the US after 9/11, making the latter the perfect breeding ground for discrimination and racism. Mohsin Hamid depicts this discrimination beautifully in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Hamid’s novel tells the story of Changez, a Pakistani immigrant in the US, who first arrived on an F1 student visa. Changez studied at Princeton where he did very well. Thanks to his Ivy League education he got a job at a prestigious business firm, Underwood Samson, in New York. The latter’s name was an ingenious choice on Hamid’s part as the abbreviation of the firm’s name is US. In the beginning, Changez feels like an integral part of the city, like a “young New Yorker with the city at [his] feet” (Hamid 51). He even sees his foreignness as an asset, something that makes him more interesting and alluring to Erica, his love interest. When walking in his Pakistani clothes in the city, someone smiles at him which he sees as a kind of invitation towards him. He interprets it as the city recognizing his foreignness and finding it charming and interesting. However, after the attacks everything changes. In the following excerpt, Changez comments on his American coworkers’ reaction when he decided to let his beard grow after coming back from a visit to Lahore to see his family,

It is remarkable, given its physical insignificance – it is only a hairstyle, after all – the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen. More than once, travelling on the subway – where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly

blending in- I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight the subject of whispers and stares. (130)

On another occasion, he is called a “Fucking Arab” (Hamid 117), while he is not even an Arab, and had his tires slashed when going to a company to assess its value. This transition between Changez’s feeling of belonging to the city to feeling like an outsider is best portrayed through a scene in which he takes the plane with his non Middle Eastern coworkers to go on a business trip in Manila, “While on the plane on the way to Manila—that is, before 9/11—Changez felt like ‘a veritable James Bond’ (72), on his journey back to New York he is, as above, detained and humiliated in the airport in Manila, treated with suspicion on the flight itself, and rudely interrogated upon arriving in New York” (Perfect 197). On his way to Manila, which is before the attacks, he feels great and on top of the world but on his way back to New-York, he is detained by the airport security who suspects him of being a threat to security.

Hamid starts his novel after Changez has been sent back to his country upon losing his job. The whole novel is written in the form of a monologue in which Changez tells the story of his life in the US to an American stranger. They sit down for a meal during which Changez talks about his life and intertwines it with comments about the present. All those comments are addressed to the American. Changez often inquires about his guest’s well-being but he does so in a seemingly threatening way. Balfour writes that the novel “opens to a narrative that is framed from the start by vulnerability and securitization—the first words after “may I be of assistance” are “I see I have alarmed you” and “do not be frightened” (Hamid 1).” (217) From the start, Hamid introduces the framework of hospitality and of danger. Derrida writes that absolute hospitality is the radical openness to the unknown, explaining that the host has to extend hospitality without asking any information about who the guest is or what his/ her intentions are.

However, in this situation the host, namely Changez, already knows something about his guest, namely that he is American. Balfour writes about how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* challenges the philosophical view of hospitality:

The Reluctant Fundamentalist provides an entirely different scene of address, one that is not based on the a priori stranger but, rather, a scene in which the stakes of alterity are already determined: a Pakistani man sits down to a meal with an American stranger. In this way, the novel challenges philosophical hospitality by putting it to the test against the very real conditions of social and cultural life in a time of terror and demands a hospitality that is offered not in spite of difference—we might think of this as closer to the concept of tolerance—but exactly and only because of that difference. It demands that we consider the stakes of a hospitality that operates not as an a priori ethic but, rather, within the context of an encounter conditioned by a story where American excess, a growing fundamentalism, a lost love, and the 9/11 attacks have already happened. There is no encounter between Changez and the American that can come before this.” (Balfour 219)

In his article, Balfour reminds us that there is no guest without a host and no host without a guest, these two concepts are interdependent, one needs the other in order to exist. In this relationship, the host and the guest are hostage to each other, one cannot exist without the other. Changez needs his American guest without whom he would have no one to tell his story to. Changez needs to tell his story to his guest even if this may cost his life.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist engages with the dark side of hospitality, interrogating the limits of absolute hospitality. Opening your house to the absolute stranger also means exposing yourself to harm if this stranger is here to hurt you. As the novel unfolds it becomes clear that

Changez suspects the American to be there to kill him. Nevertheless, he continues telling his story, exposing himself through his narrative to this threatening stranger, in a most hospitable manner. He makes sure the American eats and drinks well and takes care of him.

asks us to consider the possibility that the most hospitable act of all might be to put ourselves in harm's way. For Changez, this means removing any powers typically conferred upon the host that might protect him from harm. The novel is, in many ways, a long process of stripping away Changez's agency, sexual prowess, economic strength, and, ultimately, his identity [...] he knows that the information he volunteers could very well lead to his death, yet he proceeds nonetheless. What is more, he assumes that the American stranger has come to do him harm and actively encourages it, persuades him to have a bite of dessert, as American soldiers are known to "sugar their tongues" before performing the "bloodiest tasks" (138). Not only does Changez march toward his own death here, he runs toward it in the most hospitable way possible by ensuring that he remains a good host, even in the face of his potential murderer. Here, the conventional and the philosophical intertwine, and Changez engages in an act of ritual hospitality en route to his final—we might even say suicidal—act of absolute hospitality." (Balfour 221)

In a way, Changez can be seen as representing the figure of the absolute host who welcomes the stranger while knowing that the latter came to hurt him. Balfour writes that Hamid's novels confronts the limits of hospitality and represents what hospitality extended at all costs would look like (223). In his essay he also quotes Baker who explains that whether you decide to extend your hospitality to strangers or not, your security is never guaranteed.

Both choices come at a cost. Baker suggests “our response can either be a welcome, in which case we take a leap in the dark, or a refusal, in which case we invite a haunting. In neither case can our security be guaranteed” (Baker 118). Yet hospitality, as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* suggests, must be offered precisely on this basis—to the “worst” of what the guest may bring, including death—or there is no hospitality at all. (Balfour 223)

Michael Perfect writes about how *the Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows that the securitization of the state might end up creating more violence and insecurity: “It suggests that—in what Changez terms our current ‘period of great uncertainty’—cross-cultural hospitality has not so much come to offer a means of allaying the distrust and the anxieties associated with ever-increasing concerns over security but, rather, has come to serve as a function of those very concerns” (203). Changez’s words, “a period of great uncertainty”, are very interesting. Burgess reflects on the relation between the concept of “uncertainty” and the concept of “security” and argues that both concepts are interdependent. He asserts that “‘it is uncertainty that enables, structures and regulates security’ (emphasis in the original). For Burgess, then, security and uncertainty exist interdependently, each one shaping, structuring, and regulating the other” (Perfect 193). This feeling of uncertainty has been used by leaders all over the world to justify the instauration of a security state and to justify other political decisions that would have not been accepted as easily by the population without this lingering feeling of uncertainty regarding their security. We are witnessing this right now in Europe with extreme-right parties gaining more and more power by using the immigration crisis and the rise of terror attacks in their speeches to instore fear and insecurity in the mind of their citizens. They portray themselves as those who will bring this lost sense of security back. In the US, Dick Cheney, Bush JR’s former

vice-president, used the insecurity and sense of threat following 9/11 to justify his decision of invading Afghanistan. He said he knew for sure that members of Al-Qaeda were hiding there because one of the US's prisoner, believed to be an active Al-Qaeda member, confessed that information under torture. However, as many studies have shown, torture is not effective in getting truthful information out of a prisoner. De facto, the information given by that prisoner turned out to be false.

Although Changez's ethnicity causes him a lot of negative discrimination, it is not always the case. Hamid does not write a lot about Changez's time at Princeton, but he still takes the time to mention that, before becoming a working immigrant in the US, Changez was an international student. This is not insignificant and deserves to be analyzed with more attention as I would argue that his time at Princeton made him the perfect employee for Underwood Samson.

Although American universities try to frame the act of welcoming international student as an act of benevolence, of hospitality and as an affirmative action to fight institutionalized racism by giving everyone equal opportunities, the truth is that "diversity" is often used as a commodity which profits universities. In her essay, Chu discusses the Grutter case in which a white woman attacked Michigan Law School in court for racial discrimination by making race a factor in their selection process. Grutter comments on briefs submitted by corporations on the very real benefits of diversity: "These benefits are not theoretical but real, as major American businesses have made clear that the skills needed in today's increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, ideas and viewpoints" (Chu 330). One way to get American students exposed to diverse people in order to become better American employees on today's global market is to have international students on campus.

Insofar as diversity is used to profit the market, welcoming international students and offering them an American education can't be seen as an act of benevolence nor of "absolute hospitality" according to Derrida's definition of it. The latter entails welcoming the guest without asking anything in return, be it the guest's name or their intentions. In those terms, hospitality is the welcoming of the other without any knowledge of who the other is nor what their intentions are and without expecting any benefit in return. Thus, if as Grutter states, diversity is used as a commodity generating benefits for universities and for American corporations who need diversity to adapt to an increasingly globalizing market, universities welcoming international students cannot be seen as an act of hospitality, nor as an act of pure benevolence promoting affirmative action. Chu writes "that the shift from 'affirmative action' to 'diversity' (or the recasting of affirmative action as diversity's tool) is significant", explaining that "where 'affirmative action' acknowledged the discriminatory foundations from which it emerged, 'diversity' is not so much a remedy as a vague good" (537). Thus, if universities seek diversity by welcoming international students, those students can be seen as just "vague goods" in a plot to benefit American universities and businesses. Grutter explains that diversity benefits more people than just universities and corporations by citing "high-ranking retired officers and civilian leaders of the United States military 'that argued that the US military needed to recruit a diverse officer corps if they were to provide national security'" (Chu 536). It is interesting to see how, in this case, diversity is seen as an asset to national security and not as a threat.

When diversity profits American society, it is encouraged and promoted as a necessity, but when the diverse subject stops profiting American society, they are seen as a threat. When we talk of diversity as a commodity, a "vague good", profiting American society, we should look

at who exactly in American society profits from this “diversity commodity”. To do so, let's once again turn to Chu's essays,

the "compelling interest" in diversity, in other words, is that of the white majority and of government, corporate, and military institutions. Having particular minorities in particular communities in particular ways makes those communities more valuable for “society” in a way fostered by the use of race as a market differential driving democratic capitalism in the first place. But if the dominant group has been and continues to be white people, “diversity” means making the community in question more valuable for white people rather than, as in “affirmative action,” justice for non-white people. (537)

Thus, diversity profits white America. When universities make an effort to accept more diverse students, they do not do so out of the goodness of their hearts, nor in the name of social change, but to profit white American society, thereby reinforcing the idea that “university and other communities are ‘for’ white people and that the interests of ‘society’ can legally be considered the interests of white society” (Chu 537). This shows American universities as a para-statal agent created by white people for white people.

American universities do not only court international students for their diversity but also for their economic value. In his 2015 article, Cantwell explains how Anglo-Saxon higher education universities are more and more market-driven and seek always more revenue especially by trying to attract fee-paying students, stating that international students are one of the largest groups of fee-paying students. Not only do they often have to pay full tuition, but they also don't have access to the federally based US financial aid (including work-study programs) and thus have to pay in some cases more than twice the amount an American student would have

to pay. Cantwell views this as the marketization of higher education institutions which he terms “academic capitalism” and defines as follows:

Academic capitalism indicated that HEIs had become increasingly market-oriented organizations that aggressively competed for income. HEIs have competed for income in part to secure market-based resources in the face of declining public support (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) and, in part because they have increasingly adopted the norms of business firms and view students as customers (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). (Cantwell 516)

Universities in many countries have implemented an overseas tuition fee, asking international students to pay more than a national student would. In most countries this overseas fee is pretty reasonable but, in the US, the full tuition price at universities reaches unbelievably high amounts. Many international students are still willing to pay because, just like Changez, they expect to get a work visa afterwards to stay in the US where they will be able to make a good living.

Universities in the US do not just sell an education, they sell the American dream and that is something many international students are willing to pay a high price for, not knowing that this dream is not accessible to everyone alike. They believe that the US immigration system is meritocratic one, that if they work hard enough, they will make it in the US, but are unaware of the many restrictive immigration policies standing in their way.

The US immigration system portrays itself to be a meritocratic one, but in fact immigration is regulated by many other factors having nothing to do with merit and more to do with race and social class. In her essay, Ellerman shows how the so-called meritocratic system, supposed to decide who is allowed to immigrate into the country and who is not, is nothing more

than an illusion. She argues that class might become more important as a factor of exclusion than race, making it easier for wealthier non-white immigrants to come to the US.:

Immigration and citizenship law continue to create hierarchies among migrants that mirror the intersection of non-meritocratic attributes of social group membership such as gender, race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, and class,” and tries to demonstrate “that access to territory and citizenship is governed by highly differentiated legal distinctions that, far from being meritocratic, closely map onto social group membership. (Ellerman 2464)

This is unsurprising as America is a capitalist country that extends its hospitality to whoever will be profitable to the country. Buying a green card has become common practice amongst the rich and wealthy of this world, give enough money and you can become a permanent resident in whichever country you would like. One has to pass many tests, get countless documents and spend a considerable amount of money on plane tickets to immigrate which also acts as a first exclusion process towards those who have less money and could not afford all those expenses. For example, Changez, a Pakistani immigrant coming to the US, was probably helped by the fact that his family belonged to a higher social class in Pakistan. He says it himself; he is not poor:

I am not poor; far from it: my great-grandfather, for example, was a barrister with the means to endow a school for the Muslims of the Punjab. Like him, my grandfather and father both attended university in England. Our family home sits on an acre of land in the middle of Gulberg, one of the most expensive districts of this city. We employ several servants, including a driver and a gardener – which would, in America, imply that we were a family of great wealth. (Hamid 9-10)

America has a history of using immigration laws to exclude and include whoever they want. An example is an exception made to the 1882 Chinese exclusion act, for certain Chinese which could be profitable to the country, showing once more how capitalistic those laws truly are and pointing towards the move from a social citizenship to a human capital citizenship: “Daniel Tichenor (2014) shows that the intersection of class and race allowed for the inclusion of non-white members of certain occupational and professional groups. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, for instance, exempted Chinese merchants and their wives from exclusion” (Elleman 2465). Perfect points out how Hamid’s novel can be seen as proof that the security state is not actually interested in the security of the people but rather in the security of the free market. He writes that “securitization practices and discourse are now, just as they were before the Towers fell, geared not toward ensuring greater human safety but, rather, toward ensuring the continued security of the very free trade of which the towers themselves were symbolic.” (200)

This profit-driven hospitality is very far from Derrida’s concept of “absolute hospitality”. Actually, the term “hospitality” does not seem fitting in this situation as it is more of a contract which should be mutually beneficial to both parties. Hamid’s protagonist, Changez, comments on the contract he entered in with the US as an international student:

We International students were sourced from around the globe, sifted not only by well-honed standardized tests but by painstakingly customized evaluations - interviews, essays, recommendations - until the best and the brightest of us had been identified. I myself had among the top exam results in Pakistan and was besides a soccer player good enough to compete on the varsity team [...]. Students like me were given scholarships, complete financial aid, mind you, and invited into the ranks of meritocracy. In return, we

were expected to contribute our talents to your society, the society we were joining.

(Hamid 4)

The word “sourced” once again calls up this image of the international student being used as a commodity that will turn out to be profitable to the country. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe writes that “the educational system (claiming a ‘multicultural’ conscience) serves to socialize and incorporate students from other backgrounds into the capitalist market economy” (40). This is very much in line with Cantwell’s notion of “academic capitalism”. Universities accept students who are thought of as being ‘diverse’ to teach them American, non-diverse, things in the hope of sending them to work in the capitalist market economy which will profit from their diversity and enjoy the fact that they were taught how to be “American”, making them just diverse enough without being too “other”.

In this kind of capitalistic system, international students are not seen as people anymore but as profit generating commodities in a business deal. “As Reisberg (2012) from Boston College’s Center for International Higher Education explained, efforts to recruit international students felt ‘a lot like a business transaction with the expectation of a good ROI (return on investment)’” (Cantwell 515). As soon as those students stop being a profitable investment to the country they have to leave. When Changez starts questioning the ethics of what he is doing in his job, he gets fired and consequently deported. As soon as he stops being economically profitable, the US gets rid of him. After laboring for the country for years, he is asked to leave the life he built behind within a week. A more humane system would look at Changez and at how long he has been in the country, what he has done for it, and would give him time to get back on his feet, maybe find another job which is more in line with his ethical principles. You can’t expect someone to leave something they spent years building in only one week. The visa system is

nothing more than a business contract between the country and the immigrant, giving the US, which is the immigrant's boss, all the power and leaving the immigrant powerless to replicate to any abuse of power that may occur as there is no work syndicate protecting the rights of immigrants.

When collecting his things upon getting fired from his job and being escorted out the door, Changez realizes the conditionality of the hospitality he had been extended and starts seeing himself less as a guest than as a servant, going as far as using the term “indentured servant”:

Armed sentries manned the check post at which I sought entry; being of a suspect race I was quarantined and subjected to additional inspection; once admitted I hired a charioteer who belonged to a serf class lacking the requisite permissions to abide legally and [who was] forced therefore to accept work at lower pay; I myself was a form of indentured servant whose right to remain was dependent upon the continued benevolence of my employer. (Hamid 178)

When he first arrived in NYC, freshly graduated from Princeton, an H-1B visa in hand, he felt like the king of the world, unstoppable. He felt like he finally had achieved his American dream. He does not feel like a guest in his host country anymore but like a New-Yorker. However, when he loses his job which was the condition on which depended his H-1B visa he realizes he has never been a New-Yorker like any other. Contrarily to him, when other New Yorkers, or Americans, lose their job they do not have to leave the country. In this instant, he realizes he has always been a guest dependent on the “hospitality” of his host country. Less than that, he uses the term “servant”. The hospitality extended to him has always been a conditional one dependent on how well he served the Empire. He could only stay in the country as long as he was profitable

to it, working for it or somehow generating benefits for it. When he gets fired from his job, he stops being profitable to the country and thus has to leave. This kind of hospitality is a very capitalistic market-based one that puts profit before the individual. On page 165 of Hamid's novel, Changez says: "I saw that in this constant striving to realize a financial future, no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present".

This capitalistic mentality is typical of the new, increasingly market-based, liberal America. Changez himself adopted that capitalistic gaze when he entered Underwood Samson and was taught to think in fundamentals. The first thing that comes to mind when talking about fundamentalism is the religious kind but there are many other kinds of fundamentalism which are less talked about. Hamid's novel portrays different types of fundamentalisms through Changez's narrative. I would argue that Changez never really became a religious fundamentalist, but he did fall prey to corporate fundamentalism. "Corporate fundamentalism, evoked in the novel through Changez's complaint that Underwood Samson always wanted him to focus on the fundamentals (175), consists of a set of rules that govern the company's global expansion, which takes no interest in anything but economic gain" (Mahmutovic 4). After starting his job at Underwood Samson, Changez states "I did not think of myself as a Pakistani, but as an Underwood Samson trainee" (Hamid 34). This marks the day where he officially adopts corporate belonging above national belonging and, I would argue, the day when he becomes a fundamentalist. At the time, Changez saw nothing wrong with that. But, when he goes back to his childhood home in Lahore, he finds it little and shabby, valuing it the same way he was taught to value companies for his job. During his stay in Lahore, he starts questioning the Americanness and the corporate fundamentalism of his gaze. Perfect writes about Changez's reaction to his childhood home:

He consider[s] his childhood home as an American valuator might” and “cannot see it as one of many conditions sustaining his parents’ lives, only a building lacking in market value.” Realizing that his family home is “far from impoverished” and is, in fact, “rich with history,” Changez wonders how he “could ever have been so ungenerous—and so blind—to have thought otherwise” (TRF, 142). [...] The American “gaze” that Changez has acquired is defined precisely by its lack of generosity; indeed, he has been taught to look upon the world inhospitably [...] in the sense that it is interested exclusively in profit, this “gaze” is that of a fundamentalist. (Perfect 199)

Changez becomes ashamed of looking down on the house that has hosted him for so long and in which so many memories lingered. He almost forgot the many emotions attached to it. Finally, he sees his house for more than its economic value and starts looking at it from a more humane perspective. The way Changez values his house at first is similar to the way the US values its immigrants, unemotionally, just a commodity which is only interesting insofar as valuable as it is profitable.

In academic capitalism in which the economic component takes precedence over the humane one, very little attention is given to international students and to who they are as individuals. Novels have the power of humanizing a certain group of people, as Chu writes “In 1900, African- American writer Pauline Hopkins could envision the novel as a way of making black people human, a process that depended on the novel's particular ability to produce resonant accounts of the individual and his or her social order” (530). In a similar process, novels featuring an international student as protagonist can help make the elusive figure of the international student more humane and by doing so call more attention to the struggle they face in the US. Novels like Hamid's foreground the humane component which is missing in the

academic capitalist theory, and helps the reader get into the mind of an immigrant in the US, understand how they feel and what they are subjected to. If “social inequality is at least in part attributable to the dominant majority's lack of knowledge about - and therefore lack of sympathy for - various minorities and their experiences” (Chu 530), novels telling the story of international students can show how hard it can be for international students in the US and act as an eye opener and call to action. Foreign students do not have the same rights as full time immigrants and are subjected to many restrictions making it hard to live in the States. They have to work harder than everyone else to maintain good grades, for their visa depends on it, and thus to be allowed to stay in the country. It is harder for them because it's a different language, but they keep working as hard as they can since their lives and their possibility of a future in the US depend on it.

Although Hamid's novel is useful in reminding the reader of the human life behind the immigrant, it does seem a bit idealistic on some points. For instance, the fact that Changez landed a job right at the end of his college career and got his H-1B visa without any issue is not very realistic. It obviously overlooks the actual difficulties for international students, especially for Middle Eastern ones, to find a job and get an H-1B visa after graduation. It does not only depend on one's merit but also on chance as it is a lottery, showing how far we are from the meritocratic system the US immigration system portrays itself to be. The new restrictions on H-1B visas have made it so difficult to hire foreign workers that most employers don't even want to try anymore even if the international candidate is particularly qualified for the job. While the international students invest so much money into getting an American education, employers are seldom willing to reciprocate the investment. As McFadden and Seedorf write “the odds of receiving an H-1B visa in the lottery hover around 1 in 3,” thus “some employers who formerly

were willing to sponsor are no longer interested in taking this chance”(44). They that “The cost to the employer and time and paperwork involved in filing for an H-1B visa, without a certainty that it will result in receiving the visa, are also influential factors” (44). Many employers do not want to take a chance on international students because the odds of obtaining an H-1B visa are too low. Colleges promote the American dream to get new international students to come study in their institution and make more money on their back, but when those students graduate from college, they realize that the American dream is not accessible to everyone alike. Immigrants are faced with the reality of all the limitations and restrictions standing between them and their dream. America presents itself as a meritocracy, that’s a lie. The truth is that it is a lottery, which is the exact opposite of a meritocracy. One can study as much as they want but when they enter the lottery their fate depends on chance. It is possible Changez got his H-1B visa more easily because he got it before 9/11 and thus before the regulations became especially strict.

The 9/11 attacks have been used to drastically restrict immigration. It has become increasingly harder to obtain immigrants and non-immigrants visas. International Students need to obtain an F1 or J1 visa in order to come study in the US. The fact that one of the 9/11 Hijackers entered the Country on a student visa has been used to explain the drastic restrictions implemented on student visas after 9/11. One of those restrictions was the implementation of the new SEVIS program. This system tracks international students from the moment they set foot in the US to the moment they leave. Everything about them is recorded and reported to Homeland Security. According to Garnet, this kind of surveillance is unconstitutional:

An effective restrictive immigration system requires control. Control comes from information about where an alien goes, what that alien does, and with whom that alien associates. However, the personal information required to maintain control is not the type

to which the United States government is normally entitled because it is constitutionally protected. Effective restriction of aliens already in the United States would not only invade their privacy but would also inevitably affect the lives of citizens. This type of regulation is inconsistent with the ideals of this country. In sum, the United States operates a restrictive immigration system that is ineffective towards aliens already in the United States; to make the system effective would be unconstitutional. (Garnet 759)

If the gathering of extensive information required by restrictive immigration measures is unconstitutional, one can't help but wonder how the SEVIS made to track and gather an extensive amount of information on international students is constitutional? Do those students not have the same rights as any other men? Are they not equal in front of the law? What happened to "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" (Declaration of Independence 1776)? Do international students lose their status as humans when they become temporary non-immigrant? Ellerman writes that Dauvergne "conceives of terrorism as a challenge of knowability: as long as it is framed as unknowable, terrorism remains impervious to human rights arguments. Because "[i]mmigration law needs less precision than criminal law and thus unknowability flourishes here" (2473). The problem is that in this security state, human rights have become less of a priority and almost undefendable because the state uses the unknowability of terrorism to justify all their actions even when those blatantly disregard our most fundamental human rights.

In conclusion, Hamid's novel engages with the themes of diversity and how the latter can be used as a commodity through showing the experience of Changez as an international student and later on in his job, which he got largely because his ethnicity was an asset as stated by Jim,

Changez's boss. It also engages with the theme of hospitality and how this concept looks like in a period of growing securitization of the state and restrictive immigration. We get to see Changez's experience as a 'guest' in America and his experience as the host who attends to his American 'guest'. By framing his narrative in the wake of the events of 9/11, Hamid explores what kind of hospitality is possible when both parties come to the table, literally as they are sharing a meal, with someone who is seen as potentially threatening. Changez suspects the American of being a spy sent to Pakistan to take him out, while the American comes to Pakistan with a preconceived idea that Middle Easterns are dangerous because of the stereotypes vehiculated after 9/11 about the entirety of the Middle Eastern population. Hamid's novel also engages with the theme of racism and discrimination. In the case of using diversity as a commodity, discrimination can be helpful to the international student and to any other diverse student as it can open the doors to prestigious schools. However, Hamid also shows the racism Changez has to deal with after the events of 9/11 through many incidents portraying people being blatantly racist towards him. Finally, although in the beginning Changez's foreignness helps him by getting him in an Ivy League university thanks to which he gets a high-profile position in a renowned company, in the end it is this very same foreignness who will force him to go back to Pakistan as he is reminded that the hospitality that had been extended to him was conditional. He was only allowed to stay as long as he profited the country and was asked to leave as soon as he stopped generating profit for the US. This represents really well the corporate thinking peculiar to North America's current capitalistic society which emphasizes the economical component over the humane one in immigration policies. Novels like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* help highlight this humane component by trying to get readers to be invested in the protagonist's story and show them the hardship he had to go through. Novels can change

mentalities and bring about social and political change since they act as an eye-opener and as a call to action. Real change can only be achieved when people start caring about the immigrant's and international student's situation. One way to make people care is to tell their stories.

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Chapter 3

Love in the Time of Covid:

My Life as an International Student

“Barely one year in and our new country let us know, every day, that we were different.”

— *Wayétu Moore, The Dragons, the Giant, the Women: A Memoir*

I was looking at the stars last night waiting for a meteor shower that was supposed to happen between midnight and four am. Aps and Pulkit joined me. We laid on the ground, all a bit inebriated. There is not a lot to do in quarantine except study, watch tv and drink...

“Have you seen one?” Aps asked

“Yes, but I have only seen one though.”

“What did you wish for?”

“Nothing I didn’t even think about wishing something.”

We continued laying, side by side, silently for a while. I asked them about their homes, about how they felt about being confined. Both talked about how they missed Omaha, not because of the city

itself but because of the people they left behind over there. Both told me how they missed their personal space. But both also told me, how grateful and happy they were to have found a place that welcomed us in our time of need, friends who protected us when we needed it the most. All three of us, we have found a new home here in the US. Yet, all three of us know how fragile our home is at the moment. Although we consider the US part of us, we are not yet considered as being part of the US. We have a piece of paper in our passport, our F-1 visa, reminding us being welcome here is only temporary. We all want to stay in this newfound home, but we all know how difficult it will be, especially now. The US president said he wanted to stop all immigration for a while. Although, sometimes with our homies we forget it, we are immigrants. Our home has not accepted us yet. Every time we meet someone new, we are reminded of how different we are; “*Oh what a lovely accent*” they say, “*where are you from?*”. Once I replied I was from Texas just to see how the other person would react. Of course, they did not believe me, I don’t sound American. I am an immigrant.

“These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started... but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers—who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally house-trained.”

— Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*

“Are you going to get married after graduation?”

If I got a penny for every time, I got asked this question I would be a millionaire right now.

“It just makes sense you know that way you can stay here and get your green card and stuff”

It is like my two only choices are getting married or leaving my best friend who also happens to be the man I share my bed with. I don't like either of those choices. Yes, I want to stay. No, I don't want to get married yet. I only want to start thinking about marriage when I can afford to pay for all of it myself, when I have a stable job, a good living situation. Marriage shouldn't be my ticket in, only a solution to a problem. Everything reminds me that I am only a temporary guest here and that my welcome is going to expire soon. We have had a couple of close call David and me.

Did I ever think about taking the easy route? Of course. I would be lying if I said I didn't. I love David, marrying him wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen to us. However, I don't like the fact that getting a visa would be the reasoning behind us taking that big step. Also, this would introduce a weird and, in some ways, perverse power dynamic in our couple. Something essential to understand about hospitality and guest-host relationships is that it is a power-laden set of relations (Bell 240). By offering someone hospitality into your home, you assert your sovereignty over your home since only the owner of the place can extend hospitality, thus by offering hospitality to a guest, the owner asserts his dominance over their property. One of the many right immigrants do not have in the US is the right to extend hospitality to others. As an immigrant, you can't invite just anyone to join you in America. You can get some of your family members to America on a dependent visa after obtaining a green card but not before. As an immigrant myself, here on an F1-visa (an international student visa), I do not have the right to welcome my family in my US home for an extended period of time if they do not have a proper visa. Thus, my family needs to ask hospitality to the US state who will decide if they will grant them a visa. I am not the

master in my own home in the US, the government is. If I married David, he would be the host as he is an American citizen and I would be the guest as I am a foreigner, making him the one who has sovereignty over our home. By entering into this guest-host relationship, a hierarchy involving a power dynamic would create itself despite us. The host almost always tries to do well by their guest, but the guest knows that they are not at home and has to obey the host's rules. Bell cites Derrida in her essay "Being at Home in the nation" in which she explains that violence and power dynamics are inherent to the concept of hospitality:

choosing, electing, filtering, selecting their invitees, visitors, or guests, those to whom they decide to grant asylum, the right of visiting, or hospitality. No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one's home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. (Derrida, 2000: 55) The relationship of conditional hospitality is then a relationship of unequal power, in which the host is sovereign. Without that sovereignty, that 'at-home', there can be no hospitality, no space from which a welcome might be extended or to which a new arrival might be welcomed. Thus, the generosity and openness of the discourse of hospitality is belied by the power relations involved. (Bell 240)

When a guest marries someone, who is part of the host country, the latter will have more power over the guest than ever before. Although I trust David would never do that, it does trap us in a bad situation. I wouldn't be able to leave even if I wanted to before getting my green card, which could take years. If I ever did something or something that displeased him, he could simply threaten me with deportation to have his way. This is not that far-fetched. This dynamic has been observed in many guest-host couples who get married. Marriage adds an extra power dynamic to the

relationship. The guest is at the mercy of the host as the host has all the power in this dynamic. The host can simply call ICE on his/ her partner and get them deported. Although the host loses a partner, the partner, who is also the guest, loses everything. His/ her life, habitation, job, everything they build in the host's country can be taken away in the blink of an eye. If I ever do decide to marry, I want to take this step as an equal to my partner.

Recently I attended a little 'get together' at a friend's house. My American friends and my international friends were there. The speaker was blasting some unknown music from David's chill beats Spotify playlist in the whole room, I was enjoying a drink with Pulkit, my best friend from India, and another friend from Brazil called David. Suddenly, we were interrupted by Nick, an American friend, who joined our conversation. In the beginning it was all fun and games, when suddenly Nick screamed

"Guys, behind you, ICE is here!"

All of our visas were still valid, none of us had committed any crimes and we all had been overly careful about complying with every rule implemented by the University and by the country. Still, I my heart skipped a beat because of the sheer terror I was feeling. Next to me, David chocked on his drink, while Pulkit crushed his can on accident. We were terrified. Nick burst out laughing

"You should see your faces guys, it was hilarious!"

To him it was just a joke, to us it was our worst nightmare. All of us came here on F1 visas and we were all thinking about how to extend our stay in the US after graduation. American universities always welcome international students with open arms because most of us have to pay the full tuition fee as we don't get any help from the state. However, we are expected to go back to our country after our studies. The thing is, after having experienced this American life, having been educated the American way, invested in a habitation, making friends, in my case finding love, we

don't want to go home anymore. Our land does not feel like home anymore. We want the US to become our home, but we are always reminded that we are guests. In a way, even after getting a green card or the citizenship, we will remain different. We will never be like other American-born citizens, we might get the citizenship but the accent punctuating our sentences reminds us we don't share the same culture as American-born citizens. We came here with a culture and a past of our own, we might assimilate to American culture, but we will never forget where we come from. There is a line a bridge here in Omaha on which we can find the border between Nebraska and Iowa delineated by a white line. Almost every international student coming to Creighton goes there at least once during their stay to experience "being in two places at once". Maybe this is a translation of our desire to be able to be part of our country and part of the US. But, we all know inside of us that once we stay in a country long enough we are changed by its culture and customs. Our experience in this foreign land changes us and in a way makes us foreign to our culture. We will always be in-between worlds, one foot in, one foot out. What a weird state to be in.

The pandemic was a good reminder for all international students that we are not Americans. Trump wanted to send us home, reminding us clearly that we were only guests and that he had the power to take our visitation right away as he sees fit. But I couldn't go home even if I wanted to. The borders were closed. The travel ban had been instituted. Maybe I could have gotten a place on one of those humanitarian planes bringing citizens back to Belgium, but children and elderly people would have to go first, which honestly makes sense. One month before Christmas, I learned another reason why I could not come back home.

“Remission’s is like a house of cards. You can never tell when it is going to collapse but you know it will.”

- Choi 266; The Foreign Student

The sun shining through the half open blinds wakes me up. Houston was always sunny, or at least that is what I believed while I was over there. It was December and still sunny with temperatures as high as sixteen degrees Celsius. I am a sunny person; I need sun to thrive. It considerably improves my mood. Mom used to always tell me I was made to live in a sunny country, a little vitamin D sponge. My eyes were half open when Momo jumped on the bed and started clawing the blanket. That was her way of telling me she wanted attention which I have always been more than happy to give her. People made fun of me, saying I was spoiling her, buying her a cat tower, a window bed, a heated bed, more toys than she needed, but she became such a support for me. Since the pandemic started, I had been feeling more homesick than ever before. Every morning, before getting out of bed, I would check Google for the latest statistics on the pandemic in Belgium. I found articles writing about how Belgium had the highest death toll per capita and about how the army had to set up temporary hospitals in parking lots to face the rising number of patients affected by Covid-19.

After checking the news, I got out of bed, put some clothes on, and went to the bathroom to make my face presentable before going outside to greet David’s family. I never had my own bathroom before, this felt like such luxury. David’s house was so beautiful, everyone had their own bathroom, even the guest bedroom. The kitchen was as big as my living room. All the houses in his street seemed to come straight out of a home design magazine. I almost felt ashamed of where I came from. We didn’t have guest bedrooms, nor any huge kitchen with marble counters.

We only had one bathroom at home, and we all shared it. I slept in the attic that had been renovated just for me. I remember how hard my parents worked to transform the attic in a cute girly bedroom. I used to love purple, so my mom made sure to stick to purple tones. It didn't look like much, but it felt like a princess bedroom to me. I was so happy and grateful to my parents for all the work they had done.

After freshening up, I went to the kitchen where Pulkit and David were playing Minecraft. I poured a cup of coffee and went to the backroom to call my parents as I had done every day since the start of quarantine.

"Hey mom, hey dad, hey sis', how are you all doing over there?" I asked forcing a smile on my face so that they wouldn't know how homesick I really was.

"We are fine honey. How are you doing? How is your thesis coming along?" asked my mom, just like every other time I rang her.

The truth is that my thesis wasn't coming along at all. I had tried writing but it just never worked. In the beginning of quarantine, we were staying at David's farm in Missouri with six other friends and his family. It was crowded, too crowded to work. I love my friends but I also need my alone time and there just wasn't any so I would spend most of my time outside, going on walks, avoiding the farm. In the evening, we would play drinking games and not be productive in any shape or form. Days started to blend into each other, and it felt like this quarantine would never end.

I was really grateful to David's family for welcoming me when I had nowhere else to go but I just missed my alone time, my privacy. I recognize how selfish and high maintenance it sounds, but the only way for me to think is to find a place somewhere I can be alone with my thoughts. This is my writing process and finding such a place in Missouri was simply impossible,

so I did not work a lot. Houston was a welcome change. A big house, not too many people, I was sure I would be able to concentrate over there. I was wrong. I didn't like lying to my parents, I am really bad at it so I tried to answer with as much assurance as I could muster.

“It's going...I am doing my best you know”

My mom frowned. she could always tell when I was lying.

“Are you okay honey? You don't seem well...” she asked with a worried expression

“It's just hard you know” I had to fight to keep the tears which started to pill up in my eyes from rolling down my cheeks “I just wish I could go home; I am sure it's going to help me study and concentrate. Can I please just take a flight ticket and come home now? I am sure they will let me back in as I am a citizen.” My voice cracked; sadness knotted my throat.

“Oh honey... It's not that we don't want you to come back, you know we want you here more than anything but then you might be unable to go back to the US afterwards with the travel ban and all. Also, ... hmmm...” My mom stopped in the middle of her sentence and looked at my dad. She started whispering to him “Should we tell her?”

“Mom you know this is a video call, right? I can very clearly hear and see you whispering.” I knew the expression on my parents' face. It's the one they have when they are trying to hide something because they are worried about how I'll react.

“Well, now we can't hide it anymore. She knows *something* is up.” My dad said with a mix of irritation and sadness in his voice. My sister who never really talks a lot during those video calls (she is just uncomfortable with talking in general, a side effect of her autism. She loves being there but prefers to listen rather than talk).

“I went to the emergency room recently because I had some pains in my bones. The doctors took some X-rays and... something popped up on it.” I could tell she was trying to make it seem

less serious than it really was. In the back of my mind, I knew what “popped up” on the X-rays, I just did not want to believe it.

“It’s back isn’t it?” The knot in my throat tightened. I couldn’t utter any sounds anymore. I knew that if I tried to talk, all the tears I had been fighting since the beginning of this nightmare would flow, and I wasn’t sure if I would ever be able to stop them.

“Yes honey, I am afraid I am no longer in remission.” She said with a sorry tone.

I manage to utter a weak response

“How bad is it?”. My mom looked at my dad, as if to look for reassurance that it was okay to tell me now.

“The cancer came back, only this time it is in my bones. They can’t take the cancer out; all they can do is stop its progression. I have some medication to take and hopefully those will work for a long time. As long as the drugs work, the cancer won’t be able to progress, but we are not exactly sure how long the medication can keep the cancer at bay.” My dad who had been silent this whole time continued

“We didn’t want to tell you because you would worry and couldn’t come back anyway. No one can see mom until she gets vaccinated except me because I live with her. We could choose one visitor outside our ‘bubble’ and because your sister lives close by, we chose her. Except her and me no one else can see mom for the time being, it would be too dangerous.”

As I was trying to process all this information, I couldn’t fight the tears anymore... I started walking back to the kitchen. I just needed someone to hold me because I knew I was falling. As I was entering the kitchen, tears pouring out of my eyes and snort coming out of my nose, David and Pulkit both looked up from their screen. I could see their worried faces wondering what happened. As I felt my legs becoming dangerously unsteady under my weight, I felt David firm

grip holding me up, hugging me and telling me everything was going to be okay. My phone was still in my hands, my parents and sister still online. I could hear their voices, as in a distant murmur

“Honey, it’s going to be okay. Please stop crying, I am fine, everything will be okay.” But I could tell it was lie, everything was not going to be okay, everything was very wrong. After David hung up for me, he accompanied me to the bed where I kept crying for what seemed like hours. The trashcan next to my bed filled up at an alarming rate with all the tissues I used. My breath was short. I could not remember how people usually breathe. David tried to calm me down, playing my favorite French songs on Spotify, making sure I stayed hydrated, and holding me tight in his loving arms. Before closing my eyes, I could see I got a message on Messenger. It was from my mom. They got the diagnosis month ago but didn’t want to tell me before finals and then they just couldn’t find the right time. That day I stayed awake till I saw the last ray of sunshine shining through the blinds, then I closed my eyes and fell asleep, tears still rolling down my cheeks. The knot in my throat was gone.

Must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him in our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him?

(Derrida, 15-17)

“Do you know what a foreign accent is? It’s a sign of bravery.”

- Amy Chua; Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother

David and Pulkit took me to the museum of fine arts to take my mind off things. This was a welcome interlude from the mess my life became. I spent hours looking at all the pieces the museum had to offer, admiring impressionist and post-impressionist paintings. I am especially fond of pointillism because the closer you are from the painting the more you see the details but the hardest it is to see the whole piece, to get the whole picture you need to step back. I smiled every time I recognized the name of an artist I recognized from my undergraduate studies. I smiled more fondly when I recognized a Dutch or French painter, remembering Belgium, the Netherlands and France where I spent so many holidays with my family. On our way out, I insisted to stop at the gift shop of the museum, hoping to find a gift for my mom who I knew was also fond of art museums. On a table stood the prettiest book about impressionism I had ever seen. I made my way over there, picked it up and started to leaf through it. Suddenly I heard the voice of a man asking:

“Do you like that book?”

The man was crouched down on the ground, his service dog was supporting him. He was looking at other books on the shelf. I quickly realized this book was his and he temporarily had put it on the table while he was browsing through the other bookshelves.

“Oh god, I am so sorry sir, I did not realize this book was yours.” I said apologetically. In the back of my mind, I was wondering why he had a service dog that seem to be for visually impaired people. He did not seem blind; he saw my leaf through his book and was very clearly

reading the title of the other books on the shelves. However, I did not think it was proper to ask so I kept my interrogations to myself.

“I am so sorry Sir. I did not realize this book was yours. I just saw it and had to look inside, it is so beautiful, the illustrations are breathtaking. I am really sorry.” I replied with my heavy French accent while laying the book back on the table.

“Oh, I detect a little accent there, where are you from?” said the man getting back up.

“I am from Belgium.” I smiled under my mask. I was used to this question. Every time I opened my mouth in front of someone whom I had not previously I was asked about my *beautiful* accent. It wasn’t offensive, people were just interested because they did not hear that accent very often and couldn’t exactly pinpoint where it was from. In between French and Dutch, it seemed fair that my accent was confusing. However, every time

I got asked where I was from, I was reminded I would always be a little different, never be able to completely fit in.

“How interesting! How did you end up in Houston?” He very clearly wanted to continue this conversation. I wasn’t opposed to it, on the contrary talking with someone new was a rarity during this pandemic.

“I am studying at Creighton University in Omaha, but they closed campus because of Covid-19 so I followed my boyfriend to his farmhouse in Missouri and then later to his home here in Houston.” I explained.

“Yes, I have heard of Creighton. What are you studying there?” I could tell from his tone he was also smiling under his mask.

“I am a graduate student in the English program on the creative writing track.”

“Interesting choice. Do you want to become a writer?”

“I used to. But recently I have discovered the joy of teaching a French class to undergraduate students and since then I decided to apply to new school to pursue a master in French and maybe a PhD in the hope of becoming a professor myself. I would still write but it would probably be a side occupation.”

“You sound like a very bright young woman. Any program would be lucky to have you. Where have you applied?”

“Columbia, NYU, Montclair in New Jersey, Kent State and Lincoln University.”

“Have you had any answers yet? Maybe you already have a preference?”

“I already heard back from Columbia, Kent State and Montclair. They all accepted me. Going to Columbia would be amazing for my resume but I can’t afford it. They gave me a 10.000\$ scholarship but, because I am not American, I have to pay the full tuition fee which is 78.000\$ per year as opposed to 28.000\$ if I were American. Honestly, I couldn’t have afforded to go to Creighton either hadn’t I gotten a fellowship. My parents are not rich, and my mom is very sick so all the money we have goes to her care.” I was surprised at how quickly I shared all this information with this stranger whom I knew about except that he had a service dog and wasn’t blind. It seemed like I really needed to talk with someone, maybe the fact that he was a stranger helped me open up.

“I see, that is indeed a difficult situation to be in...” he paused a moment and then continued “You know I am a big investor at UT Austin, have you heard of UT Austin?” He took he phone out of his pocket and showed me UT Austin’s site on his phone “We have been wanting to extend our humanities program for a while. I guess I am kind of recruiting here but we would love to have you in our midst. You could start your French master there and then become a teacher for us.” He continued showing me pictures on the site. His dog barked, interrupting his expose of why Austin

was the best choice. “How foolish of me, I forgot to introduce you to my little companion here. You see most places in America do not allow dogs inside anymore and I don’t like being separated from him. I have to travel pretty often and the only way for me to have him board the plane with me was for him to become a service dog. So, I filled in some paperwork and now I can take him wherever I want. Most people don’t dare asking me anything when they see the service dog tag.” I smiled. It didn’t seem very legit, but I can understand how your animal can become so important to you that you want to have him everywhere by your side. He was probably lonely and as happy as I was to talk with someone. Two lonely souls finding each other bounding over impressionism, it would almost be romantic hadn’t he been the age of my late grandpa and had I not been madly in love with David. He ended up giving me his phone number and telling me to keep him informed if I decided to apply.

When I joined Pulkit and David in the hallway in front of the gift shop they seemed annoyed and relieved at the same time. “Finally,” David sighed “We thought you were dead for a moment there” I was confused. I did not think it had been that long. I explained what happened and although they both seemed happy for me, I could still see a shadow of annoyance on their faces.

“Are you guys okay?” I inquired.

“Yes” They replied. Then David asked “Do you know how long you were in there? Just take a guess.”

“Hmm, 30 minutes or so?”

“1 hour and thirty minutes!” David replied. I did not realize how long we had been talking about colleges, art, his dog, his life. I guess I got carried away by finding someone to talk to. I

apologized and their mood lightened up as we were driving back. That night, sitting at the dinner table, I send my application to UT Austin French program.

By the time I heard back from UT Austin, I was back in David's farmhouse in Missouri with David and Pulkit. They were informing me that a piece was missing from my application and that I had to send it to them in the next seven days before their application portal would close. I inquired about the missing document and they informed me that, as I am an international student, I had to provide new IELTS or TOEFEL results as the one I submitted dated back from more than two years ago. Originally, I thought this would be an easy issue to solve. Surely, once I'd informed them, I had been studying in America for the last two years, pursuing an English master, only ever had straight A's just like my American classmates, the issue would resolve itself and I would not have to pay an extra 250 dollars (that I did not have) to retake an exam I already passed before being granted a visa to come study here. The first time I took the IELTS, I had not been living in America, my level wasn't as good as it is today. I could not see how my level could have decreased while studying English as a master student in the US, sharing my life and apartment with an American man, and talking English all day long. I send an email to UT Austin's administration requiring a zoom appointment. I thought that once they could hear me speak, they would be reassured and grant me the exemption. Sadly, I was wrong. They informed they could not do anything about it as it was a box, they needed to check on their screen and could not check without me taking the exam. I explained my situation, telling them I had no money right now and that my parents couldn't help because their money went towards my mother's care, but it seemed like that box was an insurmountable obstacle for them. All my hopes of attending UT Austin crushed by one box that could not be checked on somebody's computer screen. Later, I learned that Pulkit, who was applying to a business master program at UT, got his language requirement waived. I

will never understand why someone checked the box for him but did not consider me proficient me enough to check it for me...

Every time I got accepted to colleges, contrarily to others, I could not yet rejoice. The only way for me to attend college in the US was to get a scholarship or a fellowship, which are not often granted to international students. In Belgium, one year at university was under 900 dollars. My parents never thought to put money away for my education because it is just not that expensive where I am from. I have thought about getting a loan, but I don't have any credit score as I just arrived and the thought of starting my life with debts, I wasn't sure I would ever be able to repay on a teacher salary scared me.

“For most immigrants, moving to the new country is an act of faith. Even if you've heard stories of safety, opportunity, and prosperity, it's still a leap to remove yourself from your own language, people, and country. Your own history. What if the stories weren't true? What if you couldn't adapt? What if you weren't wanted in the new country?”

— *Nicola Yoon, The Sun Is Also a Star*

“My parents were really into the whole “American Dream” thing when I was growing up. They didn’t know that by the time we could attain it, the American Dream had morphed into something else entirely, and no one could pinpoint what it was anymore. But maybe that was the whole point. In America, the dream is whatever you think it is.”

— Zhanna Slor, At the End of the World, Turn Left

When I came to America, I thought I was pursuing the American dream of success and prosperity. I thought after studying in an American, I would find a job here, be able to stay, bring my family here, make more money I would have been able to make at home, but I soon discovered that the American dream I came for wasn’t available to everyone alike. Universities praise their multiculturalism, showing off their international students, feeling good about their openness. Yes, international students are wanted by universities in the US, they are a rare commodity. That’s the problem though, they are just a *commodity*, nothing more. I recently learned that during the Cold War, the US welcomed many foreign students hoping to teach them how much better the capitalistic American system is compared to communism (O’Mara 2012). After teaching those students, the US’s hope was that they would go back to their country and become American ambassadors who would teach their people the “right way”. The problem the US soon encountered is that after being taught how great America was, those foreign students wanted to settle in the US and had no intention of going back home. They got to experience the American way-of-life and enjoyed it. They saw a possibility for a better future, a better life. Universities marketised the

American dream to them and then the US got upset when it realized that those students decided to buy it. It's interesting how the past always repeats itself. Nowadays, International students are welcomed by university because they generate a lot of profit as they often have to pay the full tuition fee. As International students we also agree to give away many of our rights as we become a guest in the host country and are thus restrained in our freedoms. I wanted to get another job on the side to pay my bills but couldn't because my fellowship was already 20 hours a week and as International student, I am not allowed to work more than 20 hours a week, even if I am not paid. Before coming here, I also signed the SEVIS, allowing the government to get access to all my information and monitor me as they please. In his book *Of Hospitality*, Derrida called surveillance a 'crime against hospitality'. So why do we, international students, accept all those restraints on our freedom and still decide to come here? Because we believe it is our ticket to achieve our American dream. However, we are soon disillusioned when we discover how hard it is to stay in the US after graduating. Although we learned how to fit in, we acclimated, found friends, in some cases find love, we are expected to go back where we are from, to a culture in which we don't fully belong anymore. We spent years creating a good life for ourselves, building friendships, finding love, finding a good place to live, building a network, and we are simply asked to leave all this behind to go back to a life, a country, in which we do not fully belong anymore.

“And in all the political debates about immigration that have been raging across this country, amid all the easy, glib rhetoric about America being a nation of immigrants, this loss, this toll, this terrible giving up, often goes unmentioned. The popular media focuses on what is gained: freedom, liberty, material wealth, opportunity, independence, the ability to recreate yourself. But here's what is lost: identity, language, family, lovers, friends, pets, routines, hobbies, the names of streets you grew up on, the rhythms of your old neighborhood, your favorite family foods, the color of the sky at dusk. Sometimes, even your name.”

— Thrity Umrigar, The Space Between Us

“Unofficially, we understood. There was a ceiling. Always had been, always would be. Even for him. Even for our hero, there were limits to the dream of assimilation, to how far any of you could make your way into the world of Black and White.”

— Charles Yu, *Interior Chinatown*

I had been sitting at the campus’s Starbucks for hours that day. I had an exam the day after and was far from ready. That was largely my own fault. I tried so hard to make new American friends and to socialize, I had accepted every invitation to every party and outing possible. I thought this was the best way to build strong friendships, but I would always feel out of place in parties. I never knew what was the right thing to say, I did not understand everything that was said and looked stupid every time I tried to participate in conversations. In Belgium, I used to have my group of friends, we would do everything together, understand each other without even talking, I felt accepted. I could be my own corny weird self around them, and they wouldn’t mind. On the contrary, they would love it. I used to be the funny one, the little clown, but nowadays I wasn’t as funny anymore. Being funny in English was harder than I would ever have imagined. I did not know any jokes in English and, when I tried to be sarcastic, people wouldn’t always understand and would sometimes take it personally. I felt so out of place. I always had to think carefully before talking or acting and as the days passed, I lost my spontaneity.

I saw Pablo enter the building. I met him at one of those parties and since then had made a point of saying hi to him every time I met him in an effort to break the ice and make more friends. I waived. He saw me, smiled and came to my table.

“What’s up Jo? What are you working on?” he asked.

“Just working for my exam tomorrow. I thought it would be easier to concentrate here than in my room. Plus, I really needed some caffeine to get through the day, I am a bit of an addict you know” I laughed awkwardly. Why did I say that? He must have thought I was so strange. But he laughed too.

“Yes, I understand, I think us students are all a little bit addicted to Starbucks.” He smiled, and an awkward silence followed which I decided to break as fast as possible so as to not feel uncomfortable.

“What are you up to today?”

“I am actually looking for someone to go interview people for me. It’s for a sociology project. I am looking at racial biases and if the answers of my respondent change depending on the interviewer’s race. So, I am looking for a white person to ask the questions so I can compare it to my results.” Pablo was looked Latino. I remember we talked about his origins on the first night I met him.

“Well, I can help you. I can go interview some people for you if you want.”

Pablo laughed and replied “No, I don’t think that would work. You are not really... Like you are not white enough, you know?”

His answer took me aback. I couldn’t think of anything to respond so I just smiled and continued working. To this day I still don’t understand what Pablo meant that day. *Not white enough*... what does that even mean? Did he equate white with American? That could not be right as not all Americans are white. So, was I just a little bit too tan to be considered white? Although I know that in Belgium, I am considered Caucasian and white. Maybe he meant that my accent would be a problem but again my accent has nothing to do with whiteness. I was, and still am, confused as what he meant. Maybe I looked to European. I have heard many people commenting

on how tan I looked, especially in summer. I often got asked if I was from Italy or Spain. Sometimes people would come up to me and directly start speaking Spanish. I always had to respond in my broken Spanish “No hablo Español, sorry”. It was interesting how people assumed what language I spoke or where I was from purely based on my skin color. When winter came, I lost a bit of my tan, but I was still considered different, *other*. I wonder if what Pablo meant to say that day was that I am not American enough. I will probably never be American enough even by giving it my best effort. Assimilation was hard and I didn’t have all the social and cultural codes yet. I would probably never understand it all. From then on, I got used to being *other*, being *different*.

I am in between. Trying to write to be understood by those who matter to me, yet also trying to push my mind with ideas beyond the everyday. It is another borderland I inhabit. Not quite here nor there. On good days I feel I am a bridge. On bad days I just feel alone.

— *Sergio Troncoso, Crossing Borders: Personal Essays*

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