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The Past Continues to Yell at Us: Transgenerational Trauma and Memory in Susie Yang's *White Ivy*

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Abstract

Memory and trauma of past events, specifically those linked to the forced movement of Asian (particularly Chinese) immigrants to the United States over the last century, continue to shape postcolonial narratives, as heavily reflected in the 2020 novel White Ivy by Susie Yang. As a diaspora, Chinese Americans have continually faced challenges in negotiating cultural belonging, assimilation, and traditions across different generations. By taking postmemory studies, postcolonial perspectives, and narratological methods, this article examines White Ivy, a contemporary Chinese American novel that, like many of its predecessors, portrays the complexities of family, heritage, identity, and trauma. The main purpose of this study is to examine the way trauma shapes the main character's (Ivy Lin) strategy as she assimilates into the host society (America) and how her story represents second-generation flight response within the discourse of diaspora. The discussion investigates the transgenerational trauma inherited by Ivy Lin, mainly by analysing the way the narrative structure reveals the construction of Ivy's postmemory and her response to the trauma passed down onto her. The findings of this study indicate that Ivy Lin, who represents a member of the subsequent generation, becomes the medium of traumatic postmemory, which, as a defence mechanism, she chooses to fly away from. This study thus argues that when a subsequent diasporic generation is influenced by the host society, postmemory is questioned, leading trauma inheritors to reject certain traditions passed down from the previous generation.

Keywords: *White Ivy; Chinese American; Postmemory; Transgenerational Trauma*

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Introduction

White Ivy (2020) by Susie Yang follows a Chinese-born protagonist who migrates to the United States, mirroring the author's own background (Yang, 2020a). The novel explores the immigrant experience, class mobility, and postmemorial trauma, showing how each generation of Chinese immigrants faces distinct struggles that shape identity negotiation. Over time, this trauma becomes distorted, leading to generational conflicts within families. Such patterns are common in diaspora communities, where ongoing experiences of discrimination and hardship continue to influence identity and contribute to the gradual loss or sacrifice of cultural traditions.

Released four years after *White Ivy*, Rachel Khong's *Real Americans* (2024) presents a form of intergenerational transmission of memories in which characters are shaped by, and at times compelled to perform, the expectations of the model minority myth, in contrast to Ivy Lin's active resistance towards it. R. F. Kuang's *Yellowface* (2023)is different because the white main character, June Hayward, portrays herself as being somewhat Chinese (she becomes Juniper Song) to market the stolen manuscript based on her late Chinese American friend's trauma. She performs herself as Chinese yet still twists a few things from the story to feed the dominant narrative. This paper chooses *White Ivy* as its object because what the novel does differently than other contemporary Chinese American novels is that the main character breaks the model minority narrative by strategically escaping generational expectations (particularly by stealing, lying, and using manipulation) to "survive" in the host land. These strategies that reconstruct diaspora identities can trace their roots to postcolonial dispersion.

Colonial histories often generate long-term cultural and psychological consequences; colonialism produces postcolonial conditions that can lead to displacement and trauma (Thambinathan et al., 2023). These historical experiences shape parents' upbringing and therefore influence how they parent their children. As such, trauma becomes embedded within family memory, forming patterns of inheritance that affect later generations. Chinese Americans specifically first settled in America after they were pulled in by either the Gold Rush or hired by the colonies to work the railways (Ngai, 2021). Large-scale Chinese migration to America is likely caused by push and pull factors. In *White Ivy*, the Lin family is pushed out of China by the Cultural Revolution, and pulled into America by economic opportunity and freedom.

Constructing new identities for diasporas is costly. By "costly", we are not referring to money per se, but rather the sacrifice of culture, home, and, to a certain extent, democracy (Ang, 2001). Chinese American discourse has discussed these sacrifices extensively, emphasizing cultural displacement and hybridity. In some cases, these sacrifices lead to racial violence (Takaki, 1998); as examples, there are cases including but not limited to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States and the '98 Tragedy in Indonesia. In *White Ivy*, the traumatic event that ultimately shaped the stage is China's Cultural Revolution, which happened from 1966 to 1976. This paper argues that while identity itself is not a problem, the politics imbued in the construction of identities are volatile enough to trigger racial conflicts. Identity, in all generations of the Chinese diaspora, is never not political. This inevitability of diasporic identity with politics is how the state comes into play in producing the trauma of the individual.

This paper approaches the narrative structure by applying Genette's (1980) theory on internal focalization and analepsis, or flashbacks. *White Ivy* uses these methods throughout the story. With internal focalization, the narrator is in third person but has the same knowledge as the main character. Therefore, the readers are immersed in the stories told to Ivy Lin. It is as if the readers are bearing the same role as Ivy, that is, a medium of trauma and postmemory. Internal focalization thus determines how the readers perceive knowledge of the past; Yang's (2020b) frequent use of analepsis or flashbacks explains how memories and stories are transmitted to the next generation. Ivy's preceding generations transmit stories by vividly recounting events of their past.

Literary works on the Chinese American diaspora include *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan (1989), which depicts the transgenerational transmission of memory and trauma across three generations, a theme also present in *White Ivy*. In Tan's novel, Lindo Jong projects her wartime experiences from the Second Sino-Japanese War onto her daughter Waverly, a chess prodigy, treating her as both pride and a status symbol. Wong (1993) argues that immigrant parents in Asian American literature often channel frustrated aspirations onto their children, leading to second-generation overachievement as compensation for displacement. This process pushes the next generation to question their origins and repair fractured ties to the past (Phung, 2012), with memory functioning as a tool for reconstructing ethnic identity. However, Tan and Yang diverge significantly. Tan emphasizes collective memory, maternal storytelling, and diasporic return shaped by first-generation trauma and cultural preservation. In contrast, Yang situates Ivy in a contemporary, materially driven American context where migration stems from economic precarity, and identity is shaped less by inherited memory than by reinvention and class anxiety. So, while Tan frames memory as identity reclamation, Yang presents it as strategic manipulation, shifting the diaspora narrative from communal healing to individual survival.

In Chinese American literature, familial and diasporic themes such as displacement, legacy, and multiculturalism resonate within texts like *The Joy Luck Club* (Tan, 1989) and *White Ivy* (Yang, 2020b), repeating the trope of household conflicts that derive from a string of past memories. The question is simple: Why are these themes always similar? Furthermore, how could authors who were born after traumatic events, like Amy Tan, write a story about the Sino-Japanese War? The answer lies in a theory proposed by Marianne Hirsch (2012) called "Postmemory".

Discourse on transgenerational trauma in diaspora is closely linked to memory and postmemory (Alexander, 2012; Hirsch, 2012), with postmemory playing a significant role in shaping diasporic identities and collective remembrance. Rather than functioning as a method, postmemory operates as a structure of intergenerational transmission through which inherited traumatic knowledge is experienced and personally felt (Hirsch, 2012). However, what is transmitted is not trauma itself, but its mediated representations and knowledge. While postmemory foregrounds the continuity of memory across generations, it does not fully explain how trauma is reconfigured, distorted, and rearticulated within diasporic familial contexts. This study therefore investigates how inherited trauma is reshaped through processes of projection, negotiation, and response within diasporic narratives. With the recent quagmire of geopolitical turmoil involving military attacks in West Asia, rumoured to be the seed of a wider war (International Crisis Group, 2026), one cannot help but to speculate on how devastating the post generational trauma will become. This is why intergenerational memory and identity studies like this paper is crucial in the global peace goal, because it helps us to understand, heal, and cultivate postwar identities to be progressive and nonviolent.

A relevant recent study is Baser and Toivanen (2023) on second-generation Kurds. They argue that Kurds in Europe have formed a collective diasporic memory rooted in experiences of oppression, resistance, and displacement, which is transmitted to later generations which constructs postmemory. As second-generation Kurds interpret these postmemories, different forms of agency can emerge through protests, commemorations, social media activism, and diaspora organisations (Fight Response). However, such activist responses do not occur in all cases.

Going back a decade, Phung (2012) explores how diasporic subjectivity emerges in adopted and assimilated Chinese characters in *When Fox Is a Thousand* and *Salt Fish Girl* by Larissa Lai. Although these characters have not experienced direct trauma or displacement, they remain compelling figures for theorising diaspora. For example, Phung (2012) argues that history in *Salt Fish Girl* becomes collective memory imaginatively re-felt by the post generation. Phung argues that diasporic

subjectivity stems not only from biological lineage but also from a desire to look back and understand a past that feels distant from the dominant host culture. However, these assimilated descendants often feel a lack of "Chineseness," being seen as inauthentic and, due to immigrant shame, repress their origins to pass as model minorities (Phung, 2012, p. 12). However, Phung's notion of "immigrant shame" reveals a flaw: disconnection from ancestral culture is not always driven by shame, but can be a forced, strategic reconstruction of identity shaped by a response towards traumatic (post)memory. Shame is not the sole driver of forced assimilation or the Flight Response; factors such as the host land's social structures, the State, and media consumption also pull diasporic subjects away from household culture toward dominant norms.

Ultimately, this paper finds that previous studies have always treated Hirsch's (2012) postmemory as a medium of trauma transmission, which becomes the foundation for many case studies in different spaces, subjects, and traumatic events. What previous studies of postmemory and identity often argue is that subsequent generations tend to form an agency to reconstruct the past and try to make sense of it. Meanwhile, this paper offers to fill the gap by arguing that in certain cases, the subsequent generation chooses to actively escape the traumatic past as a strategy (a strategy which, for now, we call the "Flight Response"). This specific response is exactly what is portrayed by Ivy Lin in *White Ivy*. She becomes "whiter and whiter" the further we are into the story (hence the novel's title). Therefore, the objective of this paper is clear, which is to examine how transgenerational trauma in *White Ivy* evolves from inherited postmemory into distorted familial projection and how it can trigger second-generation flight response within the Chinese American diaspora.

Methodology

The research approach used is literary analysis, using postcolonial lens, so that the analysis can dissect the intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the novel. To dissect the novel, however, we put into consideration the way both elements are applied. Therefore, Genette's (1980) theories and concepts of narratology are crucial to the process. This approach ensures that the narrative can be easily mapped out, where all historical contexts and building blocks for Ivy's identity are revealed.

As Genette (1980) consistently writes, "focalisation sur" in French: while a story is told from a particular point of view, a narrative focuses on something. The novel uses internal focalization; the narrator says only what a given character knows (Genette, 1980, p. 189). In short, in internal focalization, the narrator is different from the main character, but has the same knowledge as them and has the power to narrate their cognitive processes. The novel is thus narrated by an unnamed narrator who follows Ivy Lin very closely; her thoughts, emotions, motivations, and memories are deeply explored throughout the novel.

In applying Genette's theories on narratology in dissecting the narrative, this study can easily examine the novel's narrative structure to reflect the thematic concerns of transgenerational trauma and cultural displacement. Genette's (1980) concepts of focalization and temporality are instrumental in identifying the construction of Ivy's identity and her role in the novel, as well as the generational influences embedded in the narrative. For example, Genette's notion of focalization, the lens through which the story is perceived, helps trace how Ivy's point of view is shaped by both her immediate experiences and the expectations inherited from her family. This paper analyses the temporal ordering of events, such as the frequent use of analepsis (flashbacks), which functions as a literary device that brings the past into conversation with the present, effectively illustrating how trauma lingers and reappears across generations.

With the narrative's use of analepsis, the reader becomes an active participant in gaining knowledge of the past. The fragmented presentation of events forces the reader to reconstruct Ivy's personal and familial history in a manner similar to the way inherited memory operates in diasporic contexts. Rather than presenting the past as a linear and

complete narrative, the novel reveals it gradually through recollections, personal conversations, and remembered experiences. This structure mirrors the transmission of intergenerational memory, where descendants often encounter the past through partial narratives, emotional residues, and occasional disclosures rather than direct experience. By examining the placement and function of these analeptic moments, this study identifies how the narrative itself stages the persistence of historical experiences within the present.

In addition to temporal manipulation, the narrative voice plays an important role in mediating the reader's understanding of Ivy's interiority. Although the narrator remains external to the protagonist, the internal focalization allows the narration to access Ivy's psychological processes, including her ambitions, insecurities, and perceptions of social hierarchies. This closeness between narrator and character enables the narrative to expose the internal tensions that arise from Ivy's position as the child of immigrants navigating an elite American social environment. Through this narrative, the novel reveals how Ivy interprets the cultural signals around her and how she strategically adapts her behaviour in response to them. The reader therefore gains insight not only into Ivy's actions but also into the motivations and anxieties that underpin her pursuit of social mobility.

Examining the narrative through Genette's framework also helps identify how the text organizes knowledge and meaning-making within the story. Because the narrative is limited to Ivy's perception, certain historical and familial contexts are revealed only when she becomes aware of them. This restriction creates moments in which the reader gradually uncovers the broader historical forces shaping Ivy's life, including the migration histories of her parents and the social structures surrounding class and race in American society. This way, the narrative structure itself reflects the partial and mediated understanding that second-generation subjects often have of their own cultural inheritance. By analysing these moments of revelation and concealment, the study can map how the narrative distributes information about Ivy's past and how this distribution contributes to the thematic exploration of inherited memory.

Beyond narratological analysis, this study also examines the symbolic elements embedded in the novel. Particular attention is paid to recurring media as cultural inheritance; objects that hold memory even without a subject. If Hirsch (2012) argues that memory inheritance uses media such as traditions, stories, habits, and institutions, then the task is to simply identify those media. For example, Ivy's grandmother, Meifeng, teaches conventional lower-class survival strategies to Ivy via acts of stealing and manipulation. This is inherited behavioural postmemory that continues in Ivy.

Approaching the findings requires Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, which frames postcolonial identities as fluid and formed through cultural negotiation. This helps interpret Ivy's position between her immigrant background and her aspiration towards elite American society, where she occupies a liminal space shaped by continuous survival. Similarly, Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity and diaspora views identity as an ongoing process of "becoming," produced through history and cultural context. From this perspective, Ivy's subjectivity emerges from the tension between inherited histories and present social pressures, particularly in her attempts at assimilation.

By combining narratological analysis with postcolonial theory, this study seeks to reveal how the novel constructs Ivy's survival strategy through both narrative technique and thematic exploration. The narratological framework allows for a detailed examination of how the story is told, while the postcolonial lens provides a broader context for interpreting the historical and cultural forces embedded within the narrative by bringing the past to the present. Together, these approaches enable the study to trace how colonial legacies and diasporic experiences intersect within the protagonist's narrative trajectory.

Through this methodological approach, the analysis ultimately aims to show how inherited histories, social structures, and narrative methods shape Ivy's attempt to strategically escape household traditions. By situating the novel within both narratological and postcolonial frameworks, the study seeks to uncover the complex interplay between personal agency and historical influence that defines the protagonist's journey. The conclusion should thus be of a credible degree, grounded in both textual evidence and established theoretical perspectives.

Results and Discussion

Previous studies on postmemory and identity typically argue that later generations construct agency by reconstructing and interpreting the past. This paper complicates that premise. It argues that some descendants instead flee the traumatic past, and this paper proposes the term "Flight Response" for this strategy. Before presenting the novel arguments, however, the paper must first scrutinize its object of research.

The novel opens with Ivy Lin, the firstborn daughter of a middle-class Chinese family. Born in Chongqing, China, to Nan and Shen Lin and raised by her grandmother Meifeng, Ivy is separated from her parents at age two when they migrate to the United States to escape the Cultural Revolution. Reuniting with them at five, she arrives with an imagined vision of the West shaped by photographs—pastoral images that construct what Amin (1989) calls a Eurocentric imagination, shaping the United States as a site of aspiration. Expecting to travel with her grandmother, Ivy is instead handed to a flight attendant, while Meifeng remains in China. Upon arrival, the narrator tells us that she is met by "two Asian strangers" who reveal themselves as her parents, now accompanied by her newborn brother, Austin. The narrator's diction of "two Asian strangers", even though readers have been told of the Chinese background, is to narrow the gap between Ivy and the reader, as the story wants us to see Ivy's parents exactly how she did at that moment. This moment marks the origin of her trauma, rooted in the sudden displacement of home, body, and familial belonging.

Her upbringing in America as a Chinese-born immigrant mirrors what Manggong (2020) writes as two cultures (Chinese and American) bubbling in his [Ivy Lin] veins. So far, Ivy's childhood has shown various factors that affect her identity. A pattern then becomes noticeable. While Ivy is placed in a certain cultural space, exported cultural products or subjects would either help construct her impression of the product's origin space or contest it. For example, during Ivy's time in China, when she was a toddler, she received photos of America mailed to her by her mother. This dialogue constructs a Eurocentric imagination in Ivy's mind. However, when she arrives in the States, that imagination gets directly challenged and questioned. Moreover, when Meifeng joins the family in America, the family seemingly creates a small bubble of rural Chongqing, China, for the Lin household in Massachusetts, creating a contest of dual identities for Ivy Lin. This string of events that leads to migration is the heart and soul of any Chinese diaspora literature.

1. The Chinese Diaspora in America

Diaspora is often associated with forced displacement and exile, involving experiences of loss, trauma, and oppression in the host land (Cohen, 2018). Chinese American discourse has discussed these sacrifices extensively, putting emphasis on cultural displacement and hybridity. In some cases, these sacrifices lead to racial violence, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States and the 1998 Tragedy in Indonesia. The Chinese diaspora specifically is the third largest diasporic community in the world, and in every one of their host societies, they have faced challenges regarding their ethnicity (Ngai, 2021; Zong & Batalova, 2017). Chinese immigrants have been present in America since the nineteenth century. They were drawn in by the American Dream and pushed out by conflicts that were happening in the mainland (Zong & Batalova, 2017). The idea of the American Dream fuels Eurocentrism, which encourages migration (de Haas, 2021). The California Gold Rush, for example, saw a large influx of Chinese immigrants coming into the United States. What the Chinese had not realized, however, was that the gold was

followed by a long history of discrimination, alienation, and Sinophobia (Ngai, 2021).

Cho (2007) argues that for second generations, the title of "diaspora" is applied when they display a mental agency of looking back to the homeland. *White Ivy* complicates the argument that diasporic identity and its traditions can be left behind. Because, unlike traditional diasporic narratives that emphasize longing, memory, and negotiation, Ivy Lin's trajectory is marked by a deliberate refusal to "look back", or at the very least, she has looked back but chooses to actively escape it for the more dominant White American identity.

A study by Hwang (2017) examines Asian American transgenerational trauma through the lens of exile, memory, and hyphenated identities, distinguishing Generation 1.5 from Generation 2. While Generation 2 refers to those born in the United States to first-generation parents, Generation 1.5 describes individuals born in their countries of origin but relocated at an early age. Culturally, they are shaped by a first-generation domestic sphere alongside an American public environment. Ivy Lin exemplifies this Generation 1.5 identity. Hwang (2017) argues that first-generation migrants transmit a stylized cultural memory, where certain elements are forgotten, and others are reshaped through reminiscence. This reconstructed memory is then imposed upon their children, often clashing with the lived realities of the host society. As a result, trauma emerges within the imagination of Generation 1.5 individuals, who must negotiate between inherited memory and present experience. Positioned between first- and second-generation migrants, they develop a hybrid sense of belonging, shaped both by direct memories of the homeland and by socialization in the host country. Thus, Ivy's imagination of China is formed not only through postmemory but also through her own lived experiences during her early childhood and revisits. Therefore, although Ivy actively escapes her diasporic identity, by definition, she is still an immigrant because she was born elsewhere.

The clashing of the two spaces (the Chinese bubble and the American landscape) lays out the challenges that construct Ivy's upbringing. Whenever Ivy's at home, she faces her "Tiger Mom", Nan Lin. According to Amy Chua, a tiger mother believes that her children can be the best students, that academic achievement reflects successful parenting, and that failure is a sign of parental weakness (Chua, 2011, p. 5). Many Asian American parents, especially those who recently immigrated to the United States, face difficulties understanding their Americanized children and finding a balance between their parental expectations and their children's expectations toward them (Zhou & Lee, 2017). Similarly, it is established early on in the novel that the Tiger Mom is pleased when they hear the words "I want to be a doctor!" come out of their children's mouths (Yang, 2020b, p. 3). Again, like when we cited Wong (1993) in the introduction section, this way of parenting by immigrant parents is triggered by the projection of their aspirations that they could not achieve due to displacement.

When dealing with societal expectations of the preceding generation, the trauma of displacement persists across generations until it is passed down again. This institutionalized trauma, deeply rooted in politics, religion, and tradition, is difficult to erase (Thompson, 2021). It is often reproduced within families through stories, behaviours, and caregiving practices (Hirsch, 2012). In diaspora, this involves an ongoing struggle to engage with inherited pasts (directly or indirectly) that may be repressed or only partially understood by the post generation (Phung, 2012). Cho (2007) argues that diasporic subjects are not born diasporic; they emerge and become diasporic through temporal acts of turning backward, "turning back upon those markers of the self—homeland, memory, loss—even as they turn on or away from them".

2. Globalization and the Model Minority

The publication of *White Ivy* in 2020 reflects the condition of a globalized cultural identity. Discussing diasporic identity requires engaging with Stuart Hall (1990), who argues that identity is a structured representation constituted through difference, meaning the Self is formed through the Other. This is

especially pertinent in a globalized context, where digital and transnational interactions, such as through video games and social media, increasingly make intercultural interactions much more common (Appadurai, 1996; Madianou, 2016). Platforms such as multiplayer video games and social media accelerate cultural exchange, minimizing geographical constraints and intensifying cross-cultural encounters. Furthermore, Hall conceptualizes identity not as a fixed essence but as a "production," always in process and constituted within representation (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Identity is, therefore, dynamic, continuously shaped by one's position in time and place. In diasporic contexts, this process is further complicated by colonial histories. As Hall asserts, colonization not only dominates materially but also distorts and disfigures the past of the oppressed, reshaping cultural memory and identity (Hall, 1990, p. 224).

In light of the novel's position within culture, history, and literature, it covers a generation of diaspora different than that of, for example, Amy Tan's generation. In *The Joy Luck Club*, released 31 years before *White Ivy*, Tan similarly projects herself into the story. Tan's mother had to abandon the life she had in China because of the Second Sino-Japanese War (Tan, 2003), which is almost verbatim with Suyuan Woo's backstory. Both Tan and Suyuan Woo left their kids from their first family because of the war. The traumatic events that shape the postmemory in Yang's and Tan's imaginations sit in different timeframes in history. Yang's way of projecting herself into the novel is seen by her real-life background, where she herself is a Generation 1.5. In interviews, Yang has noted that Ivy's Chinese American background and her feelings of "otherness" growing up in the United States draw from her own experiences navigating identity across cultures. Yang has also described how aspects of Ivy's relationship with her grandmother and her experiences returning to China were inspired by her own childhood memories and family connections (O'Neill, 2020).

In recent years, there has been increasing scholarly and cultural agency to challenge the Asian American stereotype, with researchers and writers emphasizing how the myth of "the model minority" obscures structural inequalities and simplifies the diverse experiences of Asian Americans (Walton & Truong, 2023). However, Chinese American literature was often interpreted through the framework of the model minority myth. Coined during the 1960s, the term refers to a stereotype portraying Asian Americans as a hardworking, law-abiding, and economically successful minority group that achieves upward mobility through discipline and family values. Scholars have since argued that the model minority myth functions ideologically by obscuring structural inequalities and by positioning Asian Americans in contrast to other racial minorities, particularly African Americans (Chou & Feagin, 2015). Within literary studies, this stereotype has also influenced expectations surrounding Asian American characters, who are often imagined as diligent, obedient, and socially assimilated figures. As a result, later works of Asian American fiction frequently interrogate or subvert this stereotype by portraying more complex characters whose identities are shaped by class anxiety, assimilation pressures, and moral ambiguity. Therefore, the "position" of *White Ivy* is that of a post–model minority narrative within Chinese American literature, which directly challenges the socially constructed stereotype. As Yang said in an interview with Bustle,

"Ivy kind of breaks the model minority [narrative], right? You're not given a redemption story. I think it was important to me that Ivy was not necessarily defined by being Chinese." (Colyard, 2020, para. 7)

The novel therefore reimagines the Chinese American protagonist as an ambitious social climber navigating class and belonging by flying away from a stereotype preconstructed by the preceding generation. Positioned in an unprecedented era of globalization, *White Ivy* parallels itself with today's postgeneration as being gradually more influenced by media consumption thus affecting how readers identify themselves with Ivy's flight from being identified as Chinese into being White. These globalized identities, where individuals are pulled out from their household culture to embrace foreign culture that they had consumed beforehand through

social media, are, we believe, the reason why recent generations tend to leave behind their predecessors' traditions.

3. Ivy's Flight Response

The main argument of the analysis concerns Ivy's response to transmitted trauma. Cannon's (1915) "fight or flight" response, when applied to cultural studies, suggests that individuals either confront or escape trauma. The Fight Response involves questioning and resisting inherited trauma (often in the form of demands, i.e., what the parents demand from their children), filtering cultural legacies to create agency and enact change (Baser & Toivanen, 2023). This paper adds to the argument of other responses, including Fawn (appease trauma transmitter), Freeze (follow demand despite disagreement), and Follow (agrees with demand) responses, which define different strategies of cultural negotiations. However, the scope of this paper is limited to examining the Flight Response as the dominant strategy exhibited by Ivy in the novel, wherein the subsequent generation actively escapes inherited trauma rather than confronting or accommodating it.

Ivy's flight begins early in the novel when Ivy becomes attracted to a wealthy Caucasian classmate, Gideon Speyer, described by the book as "the paragon of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) ideal." This becomes the pull factor that pulls her into Whiteness.

The narrator, through the internal focalization method, describes Ivy's internal thoughts as she speaks to Gideon. The text itself, in the form of direct speech, does not describe Ivy's mannerisms that imply her anxiety, but the narrator continues to use implicature to describe how it is said. For example, when Ivy secretly attends Gideon's birthday party, Ivy says to Gideon "Happy birthday", to which the narrator elaborates Ivy's voice as being "low and breathy" indicating anxiety behind Ivy's attraction towards Gideon. In response, Gideon says, "You look different." And then Ivy subtly replies, "Different how?" to which the narrator relays to the reader in italics: *Yes! Yes! Yes!* (Yang, 2020b, p. 23), which indicates Ivy's concealed excitement. Ivy's fascination with Gideon (including towards his free American lifestyle as shown by the party) is described by the narrator as "an explosion of pleasure like fireworks" (Yang, 2020b, p. 23). Here, Ivy's fascination, as told through internal focalization, is contrasted with Ivy's utterances, which are devoid of her personal feelings towards Gideon. Through this passage, we infer the fact that Ivy's attraction towards Gideon is still hidden beneath the fear of her strict, conventional Chinese upbringing, where sexuality is subject to extensive regulation by the state and social institutions (including the family), prompting desire to be subtle, indirect, and not explicitly sexualized (Yang & Hu, 2017).

Ivy is then discovered by her grandmother, Meifeng, who reports to Ivy's mother, Nan Lin. Nan responds by severely punishing Ivy with a bamboo back scratcher. The generational and cultural gap between Ivy and her family becomes clear, and Ivy begins to emotionally distance herself from her family's values as a form of escape, which explains a push factor.

This tension intensifies in Chapter 4 of *White Ivy*, where Ivy is told to spend her summer in China. The narrator displays her reluctance, then explains the reasoning. "Ivy remembered very little of her childhood in Chongqing, but from Meifeng's stories over the years, she'd developed a vivid picture of her birth country as a terrible place of Communists, farmers, little mud huts, and persecution (Yang, 2020b, p. 44)." This is a clear example of memory passed down to Ivy from Meifeng (which becomes Ivy's postmemory). It is then retold by the narrator, and ultimately onto the reader, further narrowing the gap with Ivy. With internal focalization, the novel grants readers privileged access to Ivy's subjectivity, while her inner life remains inaccessible to other characters. This secrecy becomes the strategy she uses to fly.

Hall (1990) argues that identities are constructed through memory. Hirsch (2012) extends this idea through the concept of postmemory. Unlike direct memory, postmemory emerges from stories, silences,

gestures, and inherited narratives passed down through families and social institutions. Because these memories are mediated through imagination and representation, they inevitably become partially fictive. As Orjuela (2020) argues, even individuals who did not live through past events can experience their emotional and cultural consequences through transmitted narratives. In diasporic communities, these inherited memories are often traumatic. Though Ivy was born after the Cultural Revolution, Ivy's mother still projects her past struggles of that era onto Ivy, which urges her to fly away from it.

The novel further reveals how these memories shape identity through internal focalization and analepsis, where Meifeng recounts their family's past in China to Ivy, at the same time as the readers learn about it. Living as a peasant farmer in rural China, Meifeng struggles financially after her husband's death and begins to treat her daughters as social and economic bargaining tools. She ultimately leverages Nan Lin's beauty for survival. This strategy reflects the political climate of 1960s China, when families perceived as prosperous risked persecution by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (Dikotter, 2017). One victim of this situation is Anming Wu, Nan's former lover, whose relationship with her is destroyed by political intervention. Nan falls into depression, while Meifeng continues searching for ways to secure her family's future. Eventually, Shen Lin offers to bring the family to the United States if he can marry Nan, a proposal Meifeng accepts.

Meifeng, who is just as much of a mother figure as Nan, teaches Ivy how to steal and manipulate people to get what she wants from an early age, a set of skills that Ivy would later utilize to successfully marry into a white family, i.e., to complete her transformation. There are a handful of notable changes which describes Ivy's transformation. Towards the end of Part Four, for example, Ivy dyes her hair blonde. This signifies a giant leap in her transformation from being Chinese to being White, as blonde hair is much more commonly associated with "whiteness" (Dyer, 2017). As Ivy grows older, she increasingly distances herself from her family's roots. She attempts to integrate into Gideon Speyer's affluent and white social circle, hoping to gain acceptance and mobility within White American society. Yet her personal relationships become increasingly unstable, particularly as she becomes entangled with both Gideon and Roux Roman, a childhood friend with whom Ivy has an affair. The negotiation of Ivy's identity becomes explicit in Chapter 16, when the Speyer and Lin families discuss wedding arrangements after Gideon's proposal. Even here, Ivy's parents are the ones negotiating Ivy's identity, not Ivy herself.

This idea intersects with debates about the relationship between identity and politics. Younge (2018) argues that while identity appears in politics, not all identity is inherently political. However, Hall (1990) suggests that identity always carries a "politics of position," shaped by historical and cultural power structures. For a diasporic subject like Ivy, identity is inseparable from politics. Furthermore, Gikandi (2001) argues that in an era of globalization, identities emerge through ongoing negotiations between cultures. This process of negotiation produces cultural hybridity, which Bhabha (1994) describes as a new space where meaning and representation are constantly reconfigured. Yet the novel shows that Ivy's negotiation leaves little room for her Chineseness because she chooses to completely leave her Chineseness behind.

Within this framework, Ivy Lin's strategy is political, where her identity is continuously reconstructed through the memories and traumas of previous generations. Meifeng's struggles in rural China, Nan Lin's migration to the United States, and Ivy's own attempts at assimilation all reveal how diaspora identities emerge through historical trauma, cultural sacrifice, and negotiation. However, Ivy ultimately chooses to leave all of those memories behind (Flight Response) as a strategy to escape class struggle and become a White Ivy.

Conclusion

The narrative structure of *White Ivy* imbues Ivy and the readers with past memories. Because the Lin family comprises three generations, and the first two are marred with trauma from displacement due to

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political turmoil in China, the subsequent generation, Ivy Lin, strategically flies away and forcefully assimilates herself into the dominant host land culture after those traumas are passed down. She does not just fly away from the expectations of her predecessors, but she also flies away from class struggle that the spaces in which her upbringing is attached to (Chongqing and Massachusetts) have instilled upon her. China pushes her out, and America pulls her in; yet, her habits of theft and manipulation, passed down from her grandmother, continued to influence her strategies. In other words, the progression of Ivy's flight is filled with hurdles from her past, i.e., her Chinese past continues to yell at her. Therefore, the way trauma shapes Ivy Lin's identity is clear; through teachings and stories passed down from the generations before her, mediated by the book's frequent use of analepsis (flashbacks), Ivy becomes a medium of postmemories, which she actively seeks to escape. However, she cannot easily detach herself from her inherited experiences, revealing the persistence of intergenerational trauma.

In the story that follows the Lin family, the process of their identity construction starts from migration, settlement, negotiation, and finally assimilation. Each step requires a reason, and the context of global politics in each generation influences how the migrated subjects go through that process. The factors and the processes interact and intersect in complex and often contradictory ways. From Meifeng's life struggles in rural Chongqing, China, to Nan Lin's scars of political marriage, to finally Ivy's attempts at total assimilation, the colonial legacy rooted in China's 1966 Communist uprising has proven to have scarred and shaped the lifestyle of the Lin family for generations. This impact extends beyond immediate experience, embedding itself into behaviour, perception, and aspiration. Ultimately, this paper suggests that literature like *White Ivy* plays a crucial role in articulating the often-unspoken sacrifices of identity due to migration and postcolonial displacement. The trauma Ivy inherits from her parents' migration and cultural suppression is never fully healed, but it becomes a foundation upon which her modern identity is negotiated.

The main argument is that Ivy's story represents a second-generation flight response within the discourse of diaspora because, as the story progresses, Ivy embraces the host land's dominant culture more and more as she distances herself from her predecessor's culture. The story shows that dispersion does not mean that a predecessor's culture disappears immediately, nor does it simply linger, but rather, there exists an inevitable process of trauma transmission and strategizing that is often burdened onto the second generation. This burden manifests in subtle behaviours, internal conflicts, and moral ambivalence that contribute to identity formation. It is then the second-generation's choice on how they will respond to it, whether through resistance, adaptation, or denial. This "choice," when examined collectively, can help us understand how the characteristics of future generations are shaped, as the projection of immigrant dreams continues to be passed down. For now, this research remains within the confines of diaspora studies, which limits its scope to a manageable analysis. Furthermore, because it is a response itself to the preexisting theories from psychology studies, the line differentiating the two must be highlighted further. Hopefully, future research can further study how globalized settings and social policies enacted by the host land shape other generational responses (Fight, Freeze, Fawn, and Follow) rooted in displacement, fostering a deeper understanding and more effective ways to address and heal traumas born out of unjust dispersion.

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