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Untold Stories

Observing my classmates, in hand with their grandparents who looked just like them, planted a feeling of shame within me. Grandparents Day in 3rd grade meant every student and their grandparents were invited to school to celebrate. In the small valley of Missoula, Montana, I was on the opposite side of the world from my grandparents living in Korea. Not only was I physically separated from them, I was emotionally and culturally disconnected from them. The few memories and knowledge I had of them were faint and limited. Growing up in the rural north-west, my parents pushed for me and my siblings to acclimate to the education system and adjust to the foreign environment we found ourselves in. The few glimpses and reminders I got of my family's stories were through my mom whenever she would reminisce about her own childhood and tell us how it was like for her growing up in Korea. Learning Korean posed itself as a whole other challenge, as we were one of 4 families in our entire town that were Korean; exposure to the language was sparse and near-nonexistent. Early on in my life, my home literacy was neglected.

In "Splintered Literacies" (2014), written by Appalachian author Amanda Hayes, she explores the importance of home literacy and the preservation of generational stories. In her essay, Hayes first discusses her childhood growing up in Appalachia, witnessing first-hand how intertwined values and knowledge are with literacy. She delves into the ways her mother incorporated their family culture and history into storytelling, through writing and reading stories similar to their family. She captures the essence of how "writing records and preserves what is valuable" and the ways in which family literacy is undermined by school literacy and

how it wasn't encouraged or embraced in academic settings, (Hayes 104).

When reading her essay, I could identify the distinction between home literacy and school literacy in the context of my own life, and how much school literacy dominated my knowledge and connection to what I know about my own family history. The subtlety of ignoring and disregarding students' cultural and family histories is what makes it so harmful because of how easily they can be evaded in educational settings. This lack of cultural awareness that I was raised with went even further to making me feel unversed in my native language and become unfamiliar with my own family history. In school, my culture was never rebuked as Hayes' Appalachian background was growing up, however, opportunities to talk about my culture or family were few and far between. Towards the end of "Splintered Literacies", Hayes elaborates on the idea of how important literacy and its taught values has a direct impact on our wellbeing, using the example of starving populations in the rural areas of America not being able to cultivate their own means of food supply because they never learned from their ancestors. She conveys the importance of writing as a means of communication and preservation of knowledge in navigating life. While she uses a specific example regarding food science, the universal relevance and connection between literacy and valued knowledge is not far off.

The role of food in my life and within my family was something that I was well-versed in. My parents' approach to educating me and my siblings on our culture was primarily through cooking and Korean dishes. I could name any Korean dish presented to me with a rough idea of how to cook it, but if I were asked to name anything else, I couldn't tell you. Familiarity with some aspect of my culture is what keeps me from spiraling over how much I don't know about my extended family or my culture. Being able to value my culture's food at a

young age was the gateway for me to continue understanding other realms of my family's history and identity. Hayes articulates a similar idea in her essay when she wrote how her "mother chose books she could relate to [their] family stories", (Hayes 104). This idea of building a foundation of connection to one's culture is something that I think is imperative, even if it is just hearing stories similar or relatable to one's family.

My first experience with a school assignment that related to my own personal family history was in my middle school English class. The task was to interview a member of my family on their childhood/life experiences growing up; I chose to interview my grandmother. The same feeling of shame that I felt in 3rd grade resurfaced as I documented unheard stories from my grandmother. During my interview, I heard for the very first time about my grandmother's older sister, whom I've never met, and how she was kidnapped during the Korean War, brought to North Korea, and still lives there to this day. Relief and frustration consumed me because of how unaware I was of my own family histories and that I only began to uncover what I had never heard or learned about.

Upon reporting what I had heard from my grandmother into a written essay for my English class, it was a bittersweet realization that Hayes similarly experiences when she notes how fortunate she was to have her mother ensure that home literacy was valued. While I was not one of the fortunate few to be raised at a young age to value home literacy as Hayes was, becoming aware of it at a somewhat early age gave me a basic understanding of why my home literacy should continue to grow. Hearing the stories of my grandmother and writing them down was a catalyst for furthering my desire to learn more about my family history. Reading "Splintered Literacies" solidified my understanding of why generational stories are so important

in our lives.

Hayes reiterates the idea that the “stories that get told, or not told, and where we’re allowed to tell them, can shape the knowledge we value”, (Hayes 105). The consequences that arise from what Hayes is stating has appeared in my own life. Lacking fluency in my native language is a symptom of the disconnect and scarcity of opportunities to explore and write about my family and culture. Despite the urgency that Hayes conveys in her essay, I found it reassuring, in a sense, that I am able to acknowledge and appreciate my home literacy and school literacy in a way I haven’t before.

Works Cited

Hayes, Amanda. "Splintered Literacies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2014, pp. 225–27. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43490914>. Accessed 25 Sept. 2024.