

Trapped in Space: Family Relationships and Astronaut Families

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Introduction

Immigrant families face unique experiences in ways that cannot be described in words. This piece is a reflection of my experiences growing up in an immigrant household where my family is displaced around the world due to work, known as an astronaut family unit. Through a contemporary fusion dance to the song *Clair De Lune* by Claude Debussy, this piece portrays my journey with acculturation, particularly my attempts to assimilate into my host culture while reflecting where I stand in my heritage culture. This classical song is a part of my family culture where my late grandfather would often play it on the piano for us to listen to during family gatherings, hence it was a representation of my family and cultural identity. *Clair De Lune* means “moonlight”, so the piece represents that while my family is apart from each other, both geographically and culturally, the same moon still shines from above, indicating we are still connected. I used fluid movement and portrayed different emotions ranging from excitement- to frustration- to melancholy, in efforts to describe the feelings I have encountered navigating through trying to assimilate in mainstream western culture while being urged to maintain a strong heritage cultural identity. It also portrays how despite certain immediate family members being largely absent in my life, they continue to provide light for my path using the moonlight and as an expression for their love based on their own cultural definition as I navigate through both my host and heritage culture. For technical purposes, my costume does not represent anything, and it is purposely selected to showcase neutrality to focus on the piece. The Asian astronaut family paints an abstract picture where this dichotomy between cultural values creates barriers for both fulfilling independence and family orientation. The intimacy and unconditional love for one another expressed nonverbally, defines what our family is despite facing both worlds.

Acculturation and the Astronaut Family Unit

Acculturation is a process of cultural adaptation where one assimilates to the new mainstream culture they are residing in. Studies suggest that a sensitive-period exists in acculturation, where younger immigrants, particularly ages 1-15 acculturated at a quicker rate, while those who immigrated after age 30 gradually identified more with their heritage culture (Cheung, Chudek, & Heine, 2011). Using a bidimensional model of acculturation, an individual's identification with either their host or heritage culture are independent factors, ranging from integrating with both cultures, assimilating to a dominant culture, or not identifying with either culture whatsoever (Cheung, 2023a). Similarly, Marcia's model describes how individuals undergo phases of exploration and commitment before shaping our identities. How we explore and commit to a cultural identity is micro-influenced by the people within our social circle (such as family), and macro-influenced through societal systems and perceived discrimination (Cheung, 2023b). As I immigrated to Canada at age 8, my cultural identity throughout time was shaped by macro-influences through western education and micro-influences from my peers; hence, attempting to acculturate to mainstream culture. My parents retained a strong heritage cultural identity, meaning they were committed to rejecting the norms and values of mainstream culture.

The astronaut family unit represents a dispersed household where the majority of the family migrates to a new host environment, while one of the parents stays in their home country to work (Cheung, 2023a). There are an array of factors that contribute to forming astronaut families, particularly because it is often a safer choice for a parent to financially support their family in this context due to the obstacles immigrants face when seeking employment in the western world. Astronaut families do have consequences because it could cause distress while a

family adapts to a new geographical and cultural environment while the family is separated from each other. These instances can be an emotionally distressing experience, where children are negatively affected due to the disappointment of an incomplete nuclear family, coupled with differences in cultural identities (Aye & Guerin, 2001). When children in astronaut families enter their adolescence and early adulthood, differences of cultural identities between family members becomes evident (as mentioned above). This can cause strained family relationships due to strong differences in values and norms. Astronaut families tend to influence children to become more independent and assertive than their country of origin, and while these are positive traits in western culture, it is not reflective of collectivist cultures, commonly found in Asian values and norms emphasizing group over independence (Aye & Guerin, 2001). Astronaut families are sometimes put in a unique position where the other parent may be heavily dependent on their children to help them navigate through the host culture, including being their interpreter, especially in cases where the parent may not be proficient in English (Aye & Guerin, 2001). These instances can explain the ethnic minority identity, where the mainstream values can put visible minorities in a psychological conflict, vying for their need to affiliate with western group membership, and an increased concern over an individual's social life (Cheung, 2023b). Acculturation with astronaut families can be complex because the children tend to assimilate into mainstream culture, while the norms and values of the parents stay separated from mainstream cultural affairs, posing difficulties in maintaining a family dynamic. Astronaut families can have significant impact on health, including the lack of emotional support, life stress, and isolation (Cheung, 2023a; Aye & Guerin, 2001).

Using these concepts, I attempt to create a dance piece that represents my journey of exploring my cultural identity while in a unique position being in an astronaut family. Striving to

practice western values that emphasize individualism while being pressured to retain heritage culture through collectivism, I find myself in moratorium, meaning I am constantly reflecting on my identity while being unable to commit anything. I aim for the piece to describe my frustration of being unable to fully assimilate into mainstream culture due to barriers imposed by my family structure, as well as my disappointment in my father being largely absent in my life while he works back home in the Philippines.

Analysis of the Piece

(0:00-0:33). The piece starts off with the moon shining on me as I wait for my family to finally be complete and fulfill a nuclear family household that is deemed normal in western households. I constantly glare into the moonlight waiting for my father to return. I reflect on the time when I would constantly video call my dad when we first immigrated from the Philippines to tell him how I missed him and how excited I was whenever he flies home to Canada.

(0:33-0:55). The piece progresses through my acculturation process with my host culture. The movement between 0:35-0:37 represents my excitement to take on the world. My adolescence marks when I first understood my values were aligning more with mainstream culture. I grew excited about my first experiences of making independent choices in my life.

(0:55-1:27). At 0:55, I look toward the moonlight but I become increasingly frustrated over being in situations beyond my control that poses barriers in my assimilation to mainstream culture. I recall feeling resentment toward my father because of his large absence in our lives as he works back home. His absence negatively impacted how I perceived him as a parental figure, and it was a reality that I cannot be fully independent from my parents, due to the contrast between our cultural values.

(1:28-1:37). I exhibit feelings of hopelessness as I lie on the floor. The thought that I am unable to express my identity due to cultural barriers and unique circumstances brought upon my family. As I circle through all of these emotions, I begin to re-explore my heritage identity and embrace how I still thrive to be family oriented and maintain a good relationship with my family, despite the unique difficulties faced by each family member. I end the piece with me grabbing the light to forgive my family, especially my father, as they guide a light to my successes.

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