

Beauty Is in the Eye of the West:

An Analysis of An Na's *The Fold*

In September of 2013, Julie Chen, a Chinese American talk show host and media personality, ignited a fire of controversy when she revealed that at age 25, she had undergone plastic surgery as a response to racism encountered in the workplace (Oldenburg, 2013). While many others in such visible media roles have professed to having undergone cosmetic procedures, Chen's "confession," as it was often labeled in the press (Oldenburg, 2013; Takeda, 2013), sparked considerable attention for several reasons. First, her motivation for the surgery was racially charged; second, the type of plastic surgery in question, blepharoplasty, is a particularly well-known procedure in many Asian communities. It widens the eyes by removing an epicanthic fold, also referred to as an eye fold, thereby creating an eyelid crease that results in the appearance of larger eyes that are less slanted (ASPS, 2014). Many Asian viewers accused Chen of being ashamed of her ethnic look; she revealed that she had received bitter comments such as, "You're denying your heritage," and "You're trying to look less Asian" (Monde, 2013). While Chen has become the face for this procedure in the United States, her decision to alter her appearance is just one of millions made by people every day in pursuit of looks that adhere to highly idealized standards of beauty.

The objectification of women's appearances has persisted throughout history, originating from the assumption that beauty is good and desirable while ugliness deserves shame and mockery (Northup & Liebler, 2010; Wolf, 1991). Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) define the feminine beauty ideal as "the so-

cially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain" (p. 711). Political activist Naomi Wolf (1991) argued that this societal obsession with women's beauty goes beyond a preference for an aesthetic; rather, it is a mechanism for achieving female obedience and maintaining control that supports dominant hegemonies. It is especially clear that the media, intentionally or not, contribute to this perception in popular culture, and the effects of this gender paradigm are still felt by most, if not all, segments of American society. This topic has been extensively explored in areas such as feminist and gender studies, self and identity narratives, and popular media. Additionally, within the past two decades, the scholarship has grown to consider the influence of Western ideals of beauty on women in communities of diverse ethnic and cultural origins.

However, a distinct gap in academic research exists regarding the impact of the beauty ideal on children and teenagers as seen in contemporary literature. This article addresses this void by exploring a cultural perspective on beauty through an examination of young adult fiction. Its purpose is to identify the messages concerning appearance that are relayed to young people of color in an adult world dominated by specific standards of beauty. Specifically, I analyze An Na's young adult (YA) fiction novel, *The Fold* (2008), for cultural examples of how some Korean American teenagers seek the Western model of physical beauty and how such standards influence the construction of ethnic identity. Due to limited academic scholar-

ship on this topic within the field of children's and YA literature, I refer to studies and research from several other domains, including popular media (e.g. blogs and online news articles), Asian American studies, feminist studies, and advertising.

Perceptions of Beauty

Beauty in Children's Media

Representations of beauty abound in all forms of media for children and teenagers, and they reflect increasingly feminized and sexualized conceptions of womanhood. Previously gender-neutral toys and board games have been modified to include more stereotypically gendered characteristics, and popular television and movie characters among girls are tween and teen starlets, whose appearances are carefully crafted with trendy makeup, clothing, and accessories. Common household products are sold via spokesmodels with hyper-feminine attributes, and even clothing for infants and toddlers is created and marketed with sexualized overtones (Giese, 2014). Messages regarding beauty saturate the daily lives of females from a very young age and undoubtedly influence their identity construction.

It is notable that within this highly commercialized and visible domain, challenges to the portrayal of girls and women have been largely aimed at attitudes and roles, not appearances. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) observed that "recent Disney films and even contemporary feminist retellings of popular fairy tales often involve women who differ from their earlier counterparts in ingenuity, activity, and independence but not physical attractiveness" (p. 722). Most recently, this has been true of the popular Disney animated films *Brave* (Sarafian, 2012) and *Frozen* (Del Vecho, 2013), in which the female protagonists are promoted as strong dissenters to the stereotypical princess role. They are "anti-princesses," yet they still conform to societal expectations of aesthetic beauty. The prominence of external appearance coupled with the growth of branding and consumerism within children's and teen media have resulted in a product-driven and beauty-obsessed culture in which a child audience is constantly bombarded with messages to become like these characters. The enduring missive is that this is possible by adopting the characters' features through the purchase of products, the consump-

tion of goods, and personal efforts to achieve conformity in appearance (Hade & Edmonson, 2003; Hunter, 2011; Sekeres, 2009).

Children's and young adult literature has not escaped this path to socialization. Research in the last four decades has demonstrated that children's stories maintain dominant power structures and discourses on gender (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003). These dominances are expressed both explicitly and implicitly in children's and young adult literature. For example, some commonly used literary tropes include the existence of a beauty elite, as seen in the *Uglies* (2005) and *Gossip Girl* (2002) series, and physical makeovers that positively change perceptions of the female characters, as seen in *The Princess Diaries* (2000) and *The Hunger Games* (2008) (Theriault, 2014).

Younger (2003) suggested that "Young Adult fictions provide compelling examples of how female bodies continue to be a site of cultural contestation" (p. 54), where the importance of external appearance battles against the self-worth, wants, and even rights of women. This is demonstrated very visibly in the abundance of YA fiction book covers that feature the faces or bodies of female protagonists rather than images that speak to the content of the stories or characters themselves. What is reinforced to children and teen readers, then, is that external beauty matters and that conforming to the aesthetic expectations in media allows girls to achieve higher status in society.

I extend these findings to argue that these messages also communicate that the type of beauty matters; though different cultures have unique standards of beauty, in the United States, the term "mainstream" most often refers to a Western aesthetic. Additionally, a descriptive like "All-American" often refers to a White ideal (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Englis, Solomon, & Ashmore, 1994; Hunter, 2011; Iijima Hall, 1995; O'Connor, 2014). Such racialized perspectives can be damaging to young people's identities, self-confidence, and assessments of others.

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Cultural Standards of Beauty

There have always been different criteria for beauty within various communities. Encompassed by these unique standards are deeper valuations of certain appearances or even cultural obsessions with particular features or body types (Dolnick, 2011; Emanuela, 2009; Kaw, 1993). For instance, in metropolitan areas such as New York City, plastic surgeons reported clear trends in cosmetic enhancements—whether facelifts, eyelid surgeries, or breast enhancements—that were divided along ethnic lines (Dolnick, 2011). In a 1994 study of cultural encoding of beauty types in media, Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore argued that beauty ideals are multidimensional constructs that have evolved in the United States to include diverse and cultural perspectives. However, I believe their conclusion is an optimistic one that fails to recognize how the American conception of beauty influences other cultural standards. An African American or Asian American perception of beauty, for example, is often altogether different from an African or Asian ideal (O'Connor, 2014; Stone, 2013a).

Within the United States, a Western ideal of beauty is the dominant archetype and one to which many other subgroups around the world aspire. This archetype consists of the hyper-feminized aesthetic portrayed in American media: long hair, light skin, big eyes, a slender frame, and large breasts. Though these attributes are considered highly desirable by mainstream society, they are not accepted without controversy. The complex debates and discourses around hair in African American communities, the eye fold within East Asian communities, and clothing in Muslim communities illustrate women's desires to both conform to mainstream beauty standards and reject them in favor of ethnic, or non-dominant, standards of beauty (Evans & McConnell, 2003; O'Connor, 2014).

A Content and Thematic Analysis

The conflict between cultural and dominant standards of beauty is explored in *The Fold*. This young adult title tells the story of Joyce, a Korean American high school student, who is offered the “gift” of cosmetic surgery by her well-meaning *gomo*, or aunt, who assumes Joyce will be thrilled at the opportunity to get an eyelid crease (also called a double eyelid). Rooted in the narrative are significant insights into the con-

struction of ethnic identity, self-esteem, and societal perceptions of beauty. Western ideals influence the characters' self-perceptions in ways that reflect the real-life concerns and trends of young people of East Asian heritage, in addition to other children of color.

I selected this book for analysis because it distinctively addresses the topic of beauty within a young adult's domain and examines it from a cultural perspective in its main plotline and themes. Being Korean American, I also found that I could relate to many of Na's characters; the book's portrayal of a wide range of perspectives regarding beauty and culture reflected many of the stances and arguments that I heard growing up.

To analyze this book, I coded the story according to qualitative methods that call for axial coding and organization of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The text was delineated into distinct units according to major and minor plot lines, character development, and dialogue. These units were then categorized into larger domains that referenced topics such as beauty, identity, culture, and hegemonic structures. It was possible to identify numerous major and minor themes surrounding beauty, such as family expectations, peer pressure, social mores, and cultural values. Many of these themes were developed in plot lines concerning three major areas of image insecurity: eyes, height, and skin. The characters in *The Fold* consciously explore the insecurities and cultural ideals surrounding these features, as well as the attempts to modify them. I further investigated these three areas using pertinent historical, cultural, and social research relevant to the East Asian context of the novel. I argue that the ways in which characters attempt or desire to alter their physical appearances within these domains are embedded with racial or gendered tensions that need to be identified in order to empower the characters and allow for healthy and strong identity construction.

I would be remiss not to mention that *The Fold* also identifies weight and body image as another insecurity for several characters. It is nearly impossible to discuss mainstream beauty ideals without acknowledging thinness and body image. Weight, in and of itself, is an important topic of study within the children's domain. Much more YA and children's literature, as well as academic research, concerns weight and body image and its influence on teens' social, emotional, and physical health (Glessner, Hoover, &

Hazlett, 2006; Nolfi, 2011; Northup & Liebler, 2010; Younger, 2003). Due to the wider discussion and scholarship already available on issues of weight and body image, I have chosen instead to focus on the three topics above in order to analyze them more deeply.

A Double Eyelid

For the characters in *The Fold*, external appearances are intricately tied to deeper issues of race, ethnicity, and identity. Nearly every character has a different facial or body feature that is highlighted as needing improvement or alteration. The story begins with an aunt, a complex character herself, who wins the lottery and, in a fit of generosity, offers each family member a gift of beautification—gifts “to make your lives better” (p. 70). In emphasizing specific external features, as well as real methods of alteration, Na brings up an interwoven web of issues present for many Asian Americans. Primarily, the story demonstrates how popular standards of beauty are often highly racialized; dominant aesthetic preferences cannot be separated from influences of Whiteness, and for many minority children and teenagers, the closer one gets to a White ideal, the closer one is to achieving a desirable status. For Asian Americans, this is seen in a battle that is waged both within oneself and in public.

Though the body of academic research in this area is surprisingly small, several issues of significance arise in studies examining beauty and body image in various cultural groups. Notably, many Asian Americans not only consider race in their valuation of beauty; they regard the look of White Americans as the height of attractiveness (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Mok, 1998a). The internalization of Western beauty standards contributes to poorer self-perception regarding physical appearance and body image compared to other cultural groups, including African Americans and White Americans (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Mok, 1998), and numerous efforts to modify appearance are made in order to fit an ideal outside their cultural norm.

This struggle is most clearly seen in Joyce’s decision regarding the fold. When the topic of her Asian eyes first comes up, Joyce compares her eyes to those featured prominently in makeup advertisements at the local mall: “[H]er eyes had never seemed narrow before, but as she stared at herself surrounded by the faces of countless models, the hurtful term *slant-eyes*

popped into her head . . . why hadn’t she noticed how thin and small they were?” (p. 84). With this new self-awareness, Joyce considers a permanent solution: Asian blepharoplasty or “double eyelid surgery.” This procedure uses incisions to remove skin, tissue, or fat from the upper eyelid, followed by stitches to create a crease above the eye (ASPS, 2014). This is meant to make the eye appear larger and rounder in shape, and the crease can take several forms to create various looks. This crease is natural for most Caucasians and many other ethnic groups. However, only about 50% of Asians are born with it, and for some East Asian populations, such as Koreans and Chinese, the single eyelid, or monolid, is considered normal (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2014).

Joyce perceives the distinction between single and double eyelids and remarks that Western women take double eyelids for granted. Na writes, “Now that Joyce’s attention had been drawn to this detail, she couldn’t stop staring at the fold or lack of a fold in all the women she knew and met” (p. 83). The importance of the fold for Joyce is rooted in racialized comparisons of what is a normal or desirable feature, and what is deviant. For Asians, a long history of demeaning statements about their ethnicity comes from this difference in eyes—slurs such as “slant eyes,” “slit,” “coin slot,” and “chink” abound—and the surgery offers a way to address this main point of difference.

The presence of a double eyelid is surprisingly dualistic in perception. For many in the Asian community, the feature is as obvious as the presence of a nose or mouth, while for many outside this community, an eyelid crease is such an assumed attribute that what the term refers to is a point of confusion. Consequently, it remains difficult for many outside the Asian community to distinguish who does or does not have it; in fact, the “it” in question is unclear. This phenomenon hints at a wider issue—an institutionalized view of external appearance embedded in social consciousness to the degree that some characteristics are so deeply accepted as normal, an alternative is truly difficult to comprehend.

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In contrast, for those who are familiar with the feature, the difference that it makes in appearance is stark. Na voices this through Joyce, who uses special glue to create a temporary crease in her eyes: “She was stunned by the difference. Stunned at how happy she felt staring at her face. Even her skin looked better with her new eyes”

(p. 194). Her new eyelid crease is immediately noticed by others, such as her aunt, sister, and friends, but not discerned by anyone outside the established Korean community. Joyce’s crush, a boy who is half Korean and half Caucasian, sees her and comments, “You just look so different” (p. 213); he is unable to figure

out what has changed and finally credits it to her hair being pulled back from her face. For Joyce, as well as many others, the eyelid crease becomes a modification that assimilates one into a Westernized view of normalization and beauty.

This is a particularly relevant issue as these surgical procedures increase in popularity. In their most recent annual report (2013), the American Society of Plastic Surgeons identified blepharoplasty as the third most utilized cosmetic surgical procedure in the United States and noted that it was up 6% from 2012. For South Koreans, this phenomenon has reached a fever pitch as their nation maintains its status as the largest market for cosmetic surgery in the world (Whitelocks, 2012). According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 20% of women between the ages of 19 and 49 in Seoul have had some form of plastic surgery; most often it is the ubiquitous double eyelid surgery (*Economist*, 2012). It is so common that many high schoolers receive the “gift” of surgery for graduation or birthdays, and it is an expected rite of passage in many families (Stone, 2013b).

With the increasing number of cosmetic procedures, technology has improved, and innovations in laser surgery now allow people to visit the doctor’s office during their lunch hour and return with new eyes, all with minimal recovery time. The industry’s prevalence is far-reaching and impacts Asia and

beyond, including the US. Rates of foreigners visiting countries such as South Korea solely for the purpose of receiving cosmetic surgery are also increasing, and it is becoming more common for Asian American students to travel abroad in order to go under the knife and return with a new feature (Lee, 2013). For those who seek less permanent solutions, the practice of using tape or glue to create a temporary crease (as Joyce did in *The Fold*) is a viable solution and a practice that is largely seen as a “pick-me-up” for the face.

The issue is further complicated because blepharoplasty holds a certain stigma for some who believe that those who get it are denying their ethnic identity (Huet, 2013). In an article about eyelid surgery by the *San Francisco Gate*, an interviewee voiced this perspective, saying,

If the deeper intention behind wanting bigger eyes has to do with beauty, then it ties back to this Western image of what’s considered beautiful. . . . if people see big eyes as beautiful and small eyes as something they want to change, it really perpetuates Asian American stereotypes of not belonging. (Huet, 2013, p. 1)

Another said,

I’ve started to come around to the idea that if you have the means to do something that gives you a significant confidence boost and improves your quality of life, then sure. But this still seems really weird to me. It seems a little bit racially self-hating, to be honest, and the fact that people are reluctant to talk about it compounds that. (Huet, 2013, p.1)

Other prominent Asian Americans have spoken out against the practice, including author Maxine Hong Kingston, who referred to “eyes that have been cut and sewn” in her 1989 book *Tripmaster Monkey* (Mok, 1998a, p. 6), and scholar Eugenia Kaw, who considers the surgery a form of mutilation (Kaw, 1993). Na uses the character of Helen, Joyce’s older sister, to present this perspective: “‘It’s ridiculous that you are conforming to these Western standards of beauty. Our eyes are supposed to be like this,’ she said and pointed to her creaseless upper lids” (p. 173). The cultural shame, or the threat of it, that accompanies the appearance of the eyelid crease, coupled with the surgery’s growing popularity, demonstrates how beauty cannot be separated from identity and culture, even among children.

It is significant that many other Asians, however, do not consider the eyelid crease to hold negative cultural associations. In her research on the popularity

of surgery among Asian Americans, Mok (1998a) observed that a large number of media articles featured quotes from people who insisted that “they [were] not denying or trying to change their ethnicity—merely that they [were] ‘enhancing’ their ‘natural’ beauty” (p. 6). Indeed, Julie Chen responded to her critics with a similar response, saying, “Guess what? I don’t look less Chinese. . . . I’m not fooling anybody here” (Oldenburg, 2013). For these individuals and others, the surgery is not a response to cultural shame but an attempt to conform to a specific cultural ideal (e.g., a Korean celebrity) instead of an American one. A common refrain is that cosmetic surgery has less to do with trying to look like someone else and more to do with feeling happier and more self-confident; the eyelid surgery, just like any other cosmetic surgery, is a means to feel better about oneself rather than conform.

Several characters in *The Fold* espouse this view, most notably Lisa, who has already gotten the surgery and is considered popular and gorgeous. Lisa confides in Joyce:

After the surgery, I just felt more confident. My eyes looked fuller and more defined. And for the first time in my life, I could actually wear eye shadow without it looking weird. . . . I finally had the confidence to start flirting with this really cute boy. . . . It was amazing how different I felt after the surgery. . . . Getting the [eyelid crease] changed my life. (Na, 2008, p. 168)

Joyce’s best friend Gina also tries to convince her that the crease is a good idea by reminding her of the confidence boost she felt: “Think about how great you felt after the makeover. It’ll be like that, only permanent” (p. 156). She further reasons, “We all do things to look better” (p. 157); this could be through makeup, clothes, or even braces. The argument laid out by these characters is nuanced and well thought out. Presented as only an option within a continuum of self-enhancements, surgery can be a means to self-confidence and contentment and thus a move to please the self rather than others. Cosmetic surgery continues to grow in use and acceptance, and the ubiquity of the practice, as well as the decision-making process, indicates that it is an important milestone in identity formation.

For all the complexity of the issue, it is important that any inherent racist rhetoric not be ignored. One of the most popular motivations for getting the surgery

is to make the eyes more alert or more accurate in expression (“On creases,” 2014). Julie Chen has stated that provocation came from her news director, who said, “Because of your Asian eyes, I’ve noticed that . . . you look disinterested and bored because your eyes are so heavy, they are so small” (Oldenburg, 2013). However, the question remains why large eyes should appear more alert or expressive, or why small eyes are associated with coldness or aloofness.

In a 1993 study by Kaw, an examination of the motivations behind Asian American women’s decisions to have cosmetic surgery found that the standards of beauty they were aiming to achieve were influenced by racial ideologies that associated ethnic features with negative traits. All of Kaw’s participants stated motivations such as not wanting to look “sleepy” or “dull” while simultaneously claiming that they were “proud to be Asian American” and “did not want to look white” (Kaw, 1993, p. 79). It must be acknowledged that the associations made between genetic features and character traits mirror the stereotypes set by the dominant culture.

Additionally, Kaw’s study concluded that the Western medical system promotes and legitimizes these racial stereotypes by “medicalizing” the terminology used in consultations in order to problematize ethnic features. For example, patients were told by doctors that their natural eyes had “excess fat” or looked “puffy” and that blepharoplasty would mitigate these conditions (Kaw, 1993, p. 81). Man (2012) extended the argument for racialized surgery when she highlighted that the eyelid surgery debate centers on the idea of Asians trying to look more White. She observed that the controversy never accuses Asians of trying to look more like people of African or Indian descent, though they commonly share features like large eyes with natural creases. The institutional underpinnings of racism within this issue suggest that Whiteness, along with other beauty ideals in mainstream society, cannot be completely separated from

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Asian blepharoplasty, even though current motivations may not cite them explicitly.

Joyce's aunt explains this when talking about her own surgical enhancements:

I did not do it for [others]. I did it for myself. Here in the United States, everyone wants to look more American. Even the Americans want to look more American. Why do you think there are so many women who diet, change their hair color and make their noses smaller and their chests bigger? (Na, 2008, p. 180)

Interestingly, despite external and unspoken pressures to look a certain way, conforming to the norm (or what looks "American") is seen as an act done for the self rather than another.

Height in Asian Men

Though beauty is largely presented as an issue that affects only females, males, too, are subjected to social conditioning in attractiveness and desirability. Eyelid surgery is growing in popularity among males in South Korea, and cosmetic surgery is becoming a more frequent choice for males who feel pressured to look a certain way in order to succeed or be accepted (Kim, 2013; Stone, 2013a). Na explores another standardized ideal for boys through Andy, Joyce's younger brother. At first glance, Andy seems preoccupied with typical childhood activities such as video games, basketball, and water gun fights. However, he is keenly aware of society's standards for what a boy should look like. He, like one of his friends, eagerly accepts a gift of shark liver pills, intended to miraculously make him taller before he enters middle school the following year. In addition, Joyce's father is gifted shoe lifts to make him taller. Both of their desires to be tall seem innocuous but are intertwined with racial and gendered tensions that question Asian stereotypes and masculinity.

In his *New York Times* bestseller *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (2005), Malcolm Gladwell examines height standards and concludes: "There's plenty of evidence to suggest that height—particularly in men—does trigger a certain set of very positive, unconscious associations" (p. 86). He goes on to explain that the majority of Fortune 500 CEOs are tall (just under 6 feet or taller), White men. It has been well established that height is associated with success and authority, but the link between height and race is less explored. Despite the incredible

diversity of groups that comprise Asia, there remains a persistent stereotype in the US that Asian men are short. Consequently, these men are seen as less able and powerful in mainstream society. Na uses Joyce's attraction to her crush, John Ford Kang, to demonstrate these racialized underpinnings:

John Ford Kang stood with his buddies two doors down the hall. . . . he towered over his blond surfer friends, his frame tall and muscular, unlike so many other stringbean Korean guys. But then, he was only half Korean and half something else. Dutch or German or something else, exotic, European. (Na, 2008, p. 8)

Joyce simultaneously rejects Korean males based on what she deems a physical inadequacy and desires the power and exoticism that John's height, in part, affords him. The degree to which John's ethnicity, both European and Korean, factors into Joyce's attraction to him underscores how ethnicity, stereotyped physical qualities, and attractiveness are tied together in mainstream society.

Mok (1998b) discusses this in her analysis of stereotype differentials of Asian American men in media. She illuminates the fact that Asian American men are often characterized in ways that do not fulfill expectations of the masculine American ideal and are contradictory to the traditional ideals of American romanticism. She draws attention to a study by Sung (1985) in which Chinese American students were found to be troubled by threats to their masculinity. The boys felt that their social standing at school was negatively influenced by their cultural upbringing, which valued images and expectations that were often different from those present in mainstream American society. Mok explains, "The U.S. media image of the masculine hero emphasizes sexual attraction but includes few physical or cultural features of Asian Americans" (p. 195). Joyce's assessment of John falls in line with this skewed model. She observes him, thinking, "He always had someone who wanted to talk to him. Even though he was Asian, he looked and acted like everyone else. Like someone who belonged in this school, in this neighborhood, with all these students" (p. 22). Her perception is that an Asian heritage, manifested culturally or physically, is a deterrent to social acceptance and belonging. More than that, the stereotypes that accompany an Asian heritage are discernable institutionally within society's expectations for the behavior and even interests of Asian males.

This is illustrated in the seemingly innocent depiction of Andy's obsession with basketball and his desire to become an NBA player. He ingests the questionable shark liver pills from *gomo*, accepting unfortunate and humiliating side effects in the hopes that he will grow in stature. Writer and NPR journalist Gene Demby (2014a) has noted that basketball is central to many Asian American communities and cultures and has a long history (stemming from before the 20th century) of cultural participation and interest. However, in the 2012–2013 season, only 0.2 percent of all men in NCAA Division I basketball were Asian Americans (Demby, 2014a). Demby questioned this minute cultural representation in a sport clearly identified as central to several Asian communities, and he addressed what he rightly assumed would be the public's first response—that the low representation was directly correlated to Asian males' heights. He countered this with a provocative statistic: Nigerians, ranked 7th from the bottom in average height for 20-year-old men by country (Average height by country, 2009), are still represented by 116 players in Division I basketball (2011). Implicit is that the public would not stereotype Nigerian men as short because of their race; synchronously, there is a widespread assumption that Asian men do not play basketball or are not interested in it professionally.

Joyce's friend Gina voices this perspective when she hears that Andy wants to be a professional basketball player and laughs in response: "What is with your family? . . . Deep denial" (p. 40). Though Andy's ethnicity is not explicitly connected to his aspirations, Na tells an important piece of racialized history when she juxtaposes Andy's passion for basketball with his self-consciousness over height. His storyline also shows how young men are affected by societal standards, expectations, and stereotypes and how they strive to alter themselves in order to conform.

Makeup and Made-up

Another area of image insecurity for characters in *The Fold* revolves around skincare, especially for the face. While Na touches upon several different issues regarding skin beautification, including cosmetics, skin color, and clear skin, thematic prominence is given to cosmetics as a method of alteration to achieve a beauty standard.

Joyce and her friend Gina experiment with make-

up, and it plays a big role in boosting their confidence. In spite of these results, the girls still find the daily application and maintenance of their makeup—marketed as a form of "natural" enhancement—to be stressful and expensive. When Joyce receives a makeover at a department store counter, Gina insists that a particular woman do it, saying, "[She does] the best Asian eyes in the business" (p. 89). Joyce's makeover depicts an experience that will likely be familiar to many Asian American teens. While many young people are interested in makeup, Joyce's concerns are specific to her ethnic features. She worries that makeup is not meant for monolidded eyes and that it will require another Asian, someone versed in modifying makeup styles for Asian faces, to properly apply it. This implies that Joyce and others who share her cultural heritage require specific beauty products and application procedures tailored to ethnic features; it also suggests that makeup is used to conform to mainstream ideals of beauty.

Current trends within the global cosmetics market tell a similar story. In the past 20 years, worldwide cosmetic sales have increased; between 1993 and 2011, the average annual growth rate was 4.4% (Ahn, 2013). Meanwhile, in the last decade, the Chinese cosmetics market has shown a 17% growth rate, and premium skin care products, chiefly skin-lightening products, have a majority market share in several Asian countries including China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan (Ahn, 2013). The growth of cosmetics sales, both globally and specifically within Asian populations, insinuates that increasing efforts are being made by women to conform to mainstream aesthetics. Additionally, the growth of media attention toward skin-lightening products and eye-enhancing makeup among Asians indicates that the cosmetics industry and its consumers are linked to racialized ideologies (Ahn, 2013; Li, Min, Belk, Kimura, & Bahl, 2008; Yi, 2012). It cannot be ignored that children and teens

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fall prey to such pressures as much as adults. Various characters in the novel illustrate how self-improvement practices are often linked to consumer activity with, at times, hegemonic undertones.

According to a report by the NPD group, a consumer research company, makeup use has climbed rapidly among tween girls (Quenqua, 2010). Notably,

this rise is not in “kid-friendly” makeup such as scented chapsticks and lip glosses, but rather in adult cosmetics. Statistics show that between 2007 and 2009, “the percentage of girls ages 8 to 12 who regularly use mascara and eyeliner nearly doubled—to 19% from 10% for mascara, and to 15% from 9% for eyeliner. The percentage of them using lipstick also rose” (Quenqua, 2010).

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These trends indicate that young girls are interested in using makeup more than ever and that the line between children and adults, and what is age-appropriate or not, is quickly becoming blurred. Quenqua (2010) argues that “parents have been fighting a losing battle with the beauty industry, which now markets to children and teens so aggressively that it invites a comparison to Big Tobacco’s efforts, like Joe Camel” (p. E6). The growth in adult cosmetic use among children combined with the boom in the Asian cosmetics industry indicate that the search for beauty is increasingly important for young Asian females. To say that cultural practices, standards, and expectations ingrained within the cosmetics market are not lost on teens is an understatement.

Na also delves into another modification practice by describing the practice of permanent makeup, in which makeup is tattooed on the face. While this is performed in many cultures, permanent makeup, or cosmetic tattooing, is a common practice in South Korea where it is seen not as extreme but as an act of convenience and natural enhancement (Lee, 2014; Park, 2012). Joyce’s Korean American neighbor Sam describes the practice, saying, “It was like a party.

[My mom] and my aunts all went together and got their eyebrows and eyeliner done” (p. 108). Joyce responds to Sam’s nonchalance with shock and thinks to herself, “How many of these Korean women were walking around with permanent makeup on?” (p. 108). Later, Joyce’s mother gets her eyebrows permanently filled in but has an allergic reaction to the tattoo ink, which blows her face up to monstrous proportions. Through Joyce’s alarm and her mother’s experience, Na intones dismay at society’s growing desensitization to aesthetic modification practices and warns of the possibility of unexpected physical and emotional consequences when striving for an idealized standard of beauty.

Discussion

Considering the great pressure to conform to mainstream aesthetics, it is surprising that so little is said about its effects on children, particularly teenagers. That they are bombarded with societal messages about how to look is understood, but the racialized efforts to be prettier or more masculine and the implicit and explicit stereotyping that occurs are areas that deserve more research. *The Fold* bravely draws attention to this phenomenon, which merits more direct discussion, especially among teens. The novel identifies existing power constructions and details how characters work to submit or conform to these societal expectations. In doing so, Na demonstrates how marginalized structures or minorities (e.g., culture, gender, sexual orientation) may be impacted by dominances and how these subgroups can empower themselves by rejecting dominant or “normative” ideals. This is demonstrated in the novel’s multifaceted view of cosmetic surgery and balanced portrayal of viewpoints. Helen’s advice to Joyce is:

It’s hard to feel all right about yourself when everything around you is saying that you have to look a certain way, act and love a certain way. Or buy this product or take this pill and it will make you better. Make you happy. It’s all bull . . . what is beautiful now won’t be later. Everything is always changing. You have to know what is true to you. (Na, 2008, p. 230)

Though Joyce ultimately makes the decision to forego the surgery and embrace her natural eyes, Helen’s warning is pertinent to teenagers, whose identities are still in the process of developing qualities,

beliefs, and values provided by their ethnic cultures, as well as the mainstream. Without cultural identification and education, individual standards of beauty cannot help but be unduly influenced by dominant perspectives (Hunter, 2011). Harris (1999) observed that:

While children might manifest prevailing cultural attitudes quite early, they lack the critical thinking skills and experience to understand the factors that institutionalize preferences for one set of physical characteristics rather than a variety. They only know that outsider status is hurtful. (p. 153)

The characters in *The Fold* understand this all too well, as do many of the teenagers in our classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods; while they may not be able to identify how Whiteness pervades their lives and their literature, they feel disempowered from being outside it.

Combatting the ethnocentric messages that young people receive requires a vast movement of knowledge, stereotype resistance, and empowerment. Demby (2014b) observed that stereotypes, rather than being simple reflections of how one sees the world, actually tend to shape what one sees in a self-reinforcing manner, manifesting in a progression that moves from observing patterns to setting rules to making self-reflexive explanations. To counter this, it is necessary to examine and reexamine stereotypes and cultural perspectives. This is especially relevant in schools, where the lunchroom continues to be divided along ethnic lines and where formative school experiences, such as the college application process, homecoming, and extracurricular activities, are influenced by majority or minority status. Educators have a unique opportunity and responsibility to confront these complex and difficult perspectives and histories with their students. But how can this be done when so much evidence points to systemic conflict and social complexity?

Educators will find a partial answer in Na's narrative. The author suggests that one person's willingness to pursue questions of ethnic identity and acculturation is a step in the right direction. Joyce listens carefully to the multitude of opinions given by her trusted friends and family members about whether to have eyelid surgery. Their perspectives reflect a wide spectrum of thought and allow Joyce's decision to ultimately come from informed and reflective contem-

plation. Admirably, Na does not provide judgment on the issue, and the reader is left to wonder what Joyce's decision will be until the end of the book. In a similar fashion, educators can best serve their students by recognizing their unique identities, validating their cultures, and respecting their decisions regarding beauty and culture. It is critical for educators to learn about different cultural aesthetics and ideals in order to validate individual narratives.

The valuation that teenagers put on appearance and status should be acknowledged and taken seriously. Oftentimes, the insecurities and obsessions that crop up in daily life significantly reflect their evolving conceptions of identity and power, both in personal relationships and societal contexts. It is through the recognition and discussion of this dialectic that educators can provide support and encouragement. Literature acts as one of the best gateways to these potentially challenging discussions. Giving students access to a variety of rich historical and cultural resources is important, as is providing space and opportunity for them to work out conflicts between heritage and mainstream cultures. Pointing out the standards of beauty that are upheld in dominant stories and opening up conversations about them can be a way to explore the culture-gender-image nexus while awaiting more multicultural representations of beauty within young adult literature. Ultimately, looking for literature that focuses less, or not at all, on outward beauty can help educators bring to light qualities of stronger significance to teens: respect and self-worth.

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