A Bite of Apple

JAMES X. WU

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to
the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.
—Genesis 3:6

A bite of apple has its cost. So, too, does a bite of the eponymous Apple corporation: in the past five years, seventeen suicides in the American electronic behemoth’s assembly line in China highlighted the bitter aftertaste of that so-called divine historical development—globalization—a supposedly mutually beneficial integration of the world’s economics (Johnson 1). And indeed, developing countries have enjoyed the creation of millions of jobs, improvements in efficiency and productivity, and transfers of business know-how, while US multinationals are repatriating unprecedented profits to their developed homeland. PC Magazine estimates that Apple pockets thirty dollars in profits for every dollar paid to workers in China (Damon). This level of profitability was unimaginable fifty years ago, when companies’ intellectual departments—management, research, and design—operated alongside their manufacturing counterparts within the same political boundaries and under the same framework of custom and legality.

Nowadays, on the one hand, Apple and its peers tap into the cheap and under-protected labor forces in the developing world to materialize brilliant ideas conceived by creative intellectuals in California, Frankfurt, or London, enjoying the best of both worlds, capitalizing on advances in logistic and communication technologies. On the other hand, though, beneficiaries of the “iEconomy,” the New York Times observed, work more than 160 hours and earn 400 dollars monthly, a meager wage that one of Apple’s suppliers offered only after 150 workers threatened mass suicide (Duhiigg and Bradsher). The huge disparity between Apple’s stratospheric profits and its Asian workers’ abysmal quality of life reminds us of an unwelcome dilemma: to sponsor a valuable development, we often pay a steep cost.
Through the success of Apple and similar corporations, essayist Thomas Friedman envisions a true dawn of globalization, which he outlines in his essay “The World Is Flat.” Unlike Columbus and Cortés (explorers who initiated the process of global integration through genocides and blatant cultural exploitation), though, Friedman suggests that the more subtle schemes of modern adventurers, such as Apple, conjure far less enmity—if not open ami-
ability. Instead of Columbus “mak[ing] the Indians he met his slaves,” the new generation of cultural mutilators seduces workers with the deceptive siren song of betterment in wages and career (664). To conveniently harness the manual power of the natives, the conquerors transplant the architecture of Corporate America and the values of market capitalism to these new, seem-
ingly virginal localities. The glass-and-steel buildings and American language that come along with this shift form a stark contrast with what India and sim-
ilar countries used to be. While playing golf in Bangalore, Friedman is 
advised by a business associate to “aim at either Microsoft or IBM,” one of the 
two shining skyscrapers that rear up, disrupting the cultural harmony and 
sanctity of the scene (663). This gross mismatch between local topography 
and architecture, cultural ambience and linguistic sounds, confuses Friedman 
and evokes in him a sense of loss. Of course, the addition of a few buildings 
to the Bangalore skyline won’t transmute it into an Indian Kansas, but still, 
“it [doesn’t] even seem like India” anymore (663). These modern workplaces 
provide the resources for modern industries that expand employment oppor-
tunities, but transformations of this kind engender an inevitable and often 
irreversible loss.

This loss may be painful, but it is in many ways necessary. In “Aria: A 
Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood,” Richard Rodriguez grapples with under-
standing what he has sacrificed to attain a public individuality; he concludes 
that, sometimes, the reward outweighs the cost. Raised by Mexican parents, 
Rodriguez commanded only a few English words when he started elementary 
school, and his lack of understanding of English syntax condemned him to be 
a “problem student” (501). A bilingual education can stymie linguistic assim-
ilation by allowing children to learn in their mother tongues at school. 
Although it prolongs what Rodriguez refers to as a “golden age” of child-
hood, a stage of life that is characterized by cultural insulation, strong famil-
ial ties, and minimal interaction with American society outside the school, 
this alternative to monolingual education delays social acceptance for immi-
grats and their children (508). Admittedly, the transition is painful, but 
Rodriguez argues that without this trauma, a rite of passage that weans chil-
dren from their parents to prepare for social life, minorities’ right to public
identities will be denied (508). In fact, he posits that humans, as social animals, need the vital determination and ability to adapt—be it via language, custom, or ideology—to survive. This conviction underscores the reasoning behind the recent linguistic shift around the globe, which has recalibrated not only speakers of Español in the United States but also Indians, Chinese, and Arabs to the English language. Many have “actually taken American names . . . and [done] great imitations of American accents,” because adopting the English language and English names—a major alteration of personal identities—ultimately pays off in jobs, manufactured goods, and services (Friedman 664). Indeed, watching as the process of globalization incorporates millions into the global competition for employment, Nandan, an Indian outsourcing mogul, predicts that “the playing field is being leveled” (qtd. in Friedman 665). In other words, the frustrating experience of adopting public identities equalizes the distribution of opportunity. As the internet and this new global language rapidly connect people across political borders and cultural boundaries, the new rules of the game award material betterment to everyone who accepts loss in order to fit in. In light of Apple’s success, Friedman ventures that the fruit of the leveling process is already ripe and optimistically announces that “the world is flat” (665). If we subscribe to the Darwinist motto, “the survival of the fittest,” we should voluntarily renounce our cultural heritage in exchange for prosperity under the apparent new international economic structure.

Despite the potential payoffs of assimilation, pathos doesn’t always agree with logos, and emotion often triumphs over rational analysis. In her essay, “On Seeing England for the First Time,” Jamaica Kincaid considers the other side of the “empowering” experience Friedman relates and questions whether the reward is worth the price. While many outsiders covet the West’s imported goods, practices, and cultures, Kincaid not only regards these luxuries as vanities but goes so far as to wrestle with them to reclaim what has been taken away from her. Living in Antigua, a British colony, she eats big breakfasts, watches her father don a British “brown felt hat” every day, and receives a British-style education (720-21). But Kincaid loathes these imported goods and culture as unsuitable ways of living, if not curses. A heavy morning diet saps her energy, and her father’s favorite felt hat, designed for Britain’s chilling winter, is ill-chosen for the burning tropical sun of Antigua; most crucially, she detests her education for its obsession with England’s history and geography, a remote land that most Antiguans will never set foot on, and its obliviousness to and utter ignorance of her people’s collective experience and environs. For Kincaid, these physiological and intellectual experiences rein-
force that “the reality of [her] life [is] conquests, subjugation, humiliation, [and] enforced amnesia,” designed to mentally prepare her for second-class citizen status, a modern cultural slavery (Kincaid 720-22). Unlike Rodriguez, who calmly trades “a diminished sense of private individuality . . . [for] public individuality,” Kincaid doesn’t want to fit in the established cultural frame but openly rebels against it (Rodriguez 508). Her different approach prompts us to ask what it is that enables her to think so critically and empowers her to address her grudges against cultural imperialism to a global audience. Paradoxically, her education in English—which was “meant to make [her] feel in awe and small”—enables her to think critically about her loss and about the ugly reality of Anglophones alongside the billions of eager ESL students (725). Kincaid relies on her bite from the apple of imperialism to develop a distinct voice and penchant for ideas, important ingredients for forming a public identity. Ironically, her enforced taste of the apple opened her eyes in a way she never expected, and her enslaver proved also to be her liberator.

This tension between the seemingly conflicting effects of cultural integration traps us in an irresolvable dilemma. As tourists, foreign students, and cultural pilgrims, we leave our respective homelands and come to the United States to participate in one of the greatest, richest, and strongest democracies in history. Just as Ricardo Rodriguez concedes his name, language, and culture to live a full life under his new identity as Richard, we rename ourselves, struggle to adopt a foreign tongue, and reconfigure our thinking patterns to make ourselves understandable to Americans. Being perceivable, after all, is a prerequisite for having a public identity. But during this rebirth, we start to see that we should not and cannot simply part with our pasts, because our redefined identities are incomplete, fragmented, and confused. Problematically, we are not Koreans, Chinese, or Indians any longer, but we are not yet Americans. We are the new generation of “global citizens”—a euphemism for the homeless wanderers caught in limbo—living on the cultural frontier that belongs to none. When Kincaid’s vision of England overlaps with the real country in front of her eyes, she helplessly expresses her angst in English, a language of the “very ugly people”: “And a great feeling of rage and disappointment [came] over [me] as [I looked] at England, [my] head full of personal opinions that could not have . . . [my] public approval” (726). Although the seizure of idea is less severe for us than it was for her, we nevertheless resort to the same outlet for our passion—writing in the borrowed language. In doing so, we try to solicit an ephemeral sense of peace, reassurance, and understanding from English, the major cause of our identity crisis, just as Kincaid and Rodriguez have done in their essays. Moreover, our experiences
as aliens in foreign lands enable us to savor the previously unthinkable bitterness of our nostalgia and melancholy, to understand that the “golden age” has little to do with wealth, fame, and degrees, and to know that what we leave behind is actually our Eden (Rodriguez 508).

Sadly, people all too often appreciate the value of their possessions and cultures only after their destruction, but such is not always the case. In his essay “Herodotus the Tourist,” James Redfield, a sociologist and classicist, examines cultural systems in transition within the *Histories* by Herodotus. Although Herodotus is an “ethnocentric” Greek, Redfield finds him capable of perceiving that “every culture is a ‘complex whole’” and that “each people has its own *nomoi* and makes sense of [its existence] in its own terms” (97-99).

In “The World is Flat,” India’s particular cultural predicament grants sanctity to cows, allows “horse-drawn carts and motorized rickshaws all jostling alongside van[s],” and exudes a distinctive ambience that differentiates India from other nations (Friedman 664). Foreigners may well find the scenery chaotic and odd, but “oddity is an ethnocentric principle” (Redfield 99). Why, then, can’t we use our ethnocentric values to understand the native people, if our culture produces technologies and wealth that empower us to conquer and to transfer people in the image of ourselves? (Redfield 101). The answer lies in Redfield’s belief in “ethnographic relativism, which holds that there are no superior societies” or better cultures (100). For this reason, Redfield might be intrigued by Friedman’s choice of a lengthy quote from Columbus’s journal to start his essay. In this entry, Columbus seeks to “convert [Indians] to [his] holy faith, [Christianity]” (qtd. in Friedman 663). Friedman is aware of academia’s widespread criticism of Columbus, whom Kincaid describes as “a liar . . . and of course, a thief . . . obsessed [with] desire . . . [and] hatred” (724). By reminding us of this strayed forerunner of globalization, his ethnocentricity, and his “[wish] to appropriate and transform the natives” to serve his needs, Friedman cautions us upfront that our current integration of people and cultures is not without risk (Redfield 100).

Indeed, “modernism is an unprecedented historical experience; for the first time one cultural system is taking over the world. A society of such power must inspire anxiety in its members” (Redfield 101). Nevertheless, this impending uncertainty doesn’t mean that we should seek refuge in sedation. Rather, we have to proceed with vigilance, commit ourselves to the new wave of globalization, and appreciate the sacrifices that we have made, are making, and will make. The apple is eaten, Eden is lost, and the gates are locked. We can choose to cover our eyes with our hands, wishing that the Creator would change his mind, or we can decide to open our eyes, realize that we are moral-
ly naked, and use our newly attained knowledge to address our manifold problems. Although fig leaves of moderation are not the ultimate solution, and thorny challenges await us ahead, we will be left with only regrets if we recklessly and shamelessly peddle globalization without acknowledging its heavy cost.

WORKS CITED


