

Parts of a Whole

by

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My full name is Carlisa Eilita Mapp. A name made up from both my parents “car” from my father Carson, “li” from my mother Ligaya, and “sa” from her maiden name Salazar. Eilita, my middle name is half my maternal and half my paternal grandmother’s names. I am my parent’s child. I am a second generation American. I am Filipino and Bajan. I am all these things but never fully them all at any point in time. Amy Sherald once said that “there is no neutrality in our existence” (Gershi 2018). These words encompassed a lot of the feelings I have about identity and art making. *Parts of a Whole* is an attempt to conceptualize having one foot in many identities while also exploring what means to be American.

When thinking about my own struggles with Americanness, I categorize them through several stages: consciousness, compliance/ conformity, collision, and coexistence. I want to explore each stage toward coexistence. The first stage is what I call cultural consciousness. I define this as the epiphanic moments when you recognize that your cultural identity may differ from someone else’s. Compliance and conformity occur shortly after, however they aren’t interchangeable. In response to the multiple identities we internally accept and resign to the cultural hierarchy. The physical act of changing our behaviors to fit the mold is conformity. When we are faced with issues we may be unable or unwilling to conform to, we enter into cultural collision. A major part of this stage is being vocal and critical of conformity. I would like to call coexistence a last stage but also a beginning stage toward understanding cultural identity for many. That is because coexistence manifests itself in many ways. The process toward cultural coexistence doesn’t end there. Sometimes, given the situation certain cultures may take precedence. It may be something small or large. It may not even be tangible, or audible, or visual.

My work ties together my personal experiences and specific cultural aspects to encompass these ideas. Kamayan, a form of table etiquette, and Mambabatok, a style of tattooing are symbols I use to visualize the stages of cultural coexistence. I aim to answer questions regarding how my cultural identities take priority, change, or in some cases become extinct.

A major part of this project for me addresses my relationship with my parents. I began by asking them questions about their own Americanness, about adaptation and loss of culture, about their transmission of their cultures to my sister and I. I tried to think of things I felt connected to or something specific to me. One of the questions I asked my parents was “Do you think you have met each other halfway when it comes to incorporating each other’s cultures?” In response my father quickly answered “Yes, but there are certain things they do that are not right.”

This idea of the “right way” is a topic I tried to explore throughout this process. In the Philippines, having a friend or family member visit your home is cause for celebration, which is usually in the form of a feast called kamayan. Refer to **Figure 2**. Kamayan, in Tagalog, literally translates to “eat with hands.” In a traditional spread, the floor or table is covered with banana leaves and topped with different meats, seafood, vegetables, and rice (Vj g'Wnko c'g'Hkpi gt'Hqqf. 2014). Yet everytime we had kamayan, my dad was always absent and disinterested. With a lot of traditionally Filipino customs, he used words like “primitive” or “wrong” to describe them.



**Figure 1:** *Ungvej dqqm!F tcy lpi "qh!Mco c{cp}j cpf u."11"x 14"*

Kamayan has a series of hand gestures that mimic utensils. Everyone is taught to eat kamayan with these specific gestures. Although it may seem child-like, it is a learned skill. I began taking photographs of my mom's hands while holding food but I struggled with ways I could represent kamayan without being overly literal. In Phillip Brian Harper's essay "Abstractionist Aesthetics" he asked how can African Americans create work that doesn't immediately fall into the category of "African American art"? His answer is the use of abstraction. He believed that if the artist were to omit the contextual items within the piece the art would be abstracted. The artist would be able to say just enough or give enough context to understand the work without creating an unintended narrative (Harper 2015). Similarly, Amy Sherald states that she used grey skin tones so the viewer doesn't immediately recognize the sitter as a certain race **Figure 18** (Sherald 2019).

**Figure 3:** *WgpkulMco c{cp"11"x14"*

I started to ask myself, what made kamayan gestures wrong or primitive in my father's eyes? What foods are acceptable as finger foods? What were the functions of each utensil? I compared the function of the kamayan gesture with utensils. I found that the orientation of the hand can also change their function and that in some cases they didn't fit within the function of the utensil at all. It was a sign language very specific to the Philippines, and became a symbol of Filipino culture within my works.

**Figure 4:** *Ko r gt lgev'Wxgpuki'28"x40"* 2020

Christine Sun Kim is an artist who works on visualizing and redefining sound and silence. An example of her work is **Figure 19**. In her work she uses symbols that are more widely known like pie charts to understand a whole and percentage, or the tree symbol that is understood as a division or being made up of something else. She then combines the language of music with these charts to create new definitions to things like silence or sound (Sun Kim 2017). After looking at her work I started noticing that even when certain things were simplified to their bare bones or basic shapes, they would still be understood. For example, we can recognize a sign for skeeball by an arrangement of rings or a traffic light by the colors. As a language, I attempted to give them meanings. I started drawing the photos of the hands and sorting them by their function as a utensil.

**Figure 16:** *Fcf'J qtf kpi 'Ur qqp.'11"x14"*

In Barbados, my family stressed that “good food is made by hand.” I remember the kitchens being very bare. Every kitchen has the basics, mortar and pestle, bowls, plates, cups, spoons, forks, knives, and a spatula. In fact, most foods they are famous for, such as flying fish or soups, are eaten with your hands.

Eating with metal utensils is something that is considered to be essential in most western homes. This led me to think about how utensils haven’t changed much. I’m always seeing commercials for tools that attempt to improve or perfect an already existing one. We make fusion tools like the spork, however the spoon, fork, and knife remain the standard. So as the utensil became a symbol of American culture it also became a critique for both American and Bajan cultures.

In my family, the spoon is considered to be an all encompassing tool. It is used to cut, scoop, and grab foods. I began making paintings of my dad’s hand holding a spoon but due to the reflective nature of metal utensils something was reflected (whether intentional or not). I thought of how reflections were used such as in Aliza Nisenbaum’s *Nqpf qp'Wpf gi t qwpf <Dt k.vqp" Ucvkqp'Xlevqt kc'rkpg'c'pf 'UcH* **Figure 170** Nisenbaum creates a portrait of herself in the small subway mirror (Nisenbaum 2019). It was a decision to not include herself beside the workers, but through a small reflection that intrigued me. She uses ambient colors to capture their personalities. Stationing a studio within their environment and talking to her sitters as they get more comfortable with her is a key part of her work. So her reflection became a symbol of their relationship. Reflective surfaces create a disconnection or a distortion of real life. That distortion and disconnect is furthered by the recreation of it through painting.



**Figure 5:** *Mco c{cp<Hco kq' Rqt vckv' 58öz'6: ö'2020*

This piece is called *Mco c{cp<Hco kq' Rqt vckv'*. My dad’s hand is in a kamayan gesture while holding a spoon. Having his hands in a kamayan gesture is a sign of cultural coexistence to me because of his past unwillingness to eat kamayan. The leaves and scale are representative of kamayan spread. Inside the concave part of the spoon is a distorted self portrait of myself. The reflection became a symbol of my struggles with identities and how I could view myself as a part of these cultures.

A few years ago I was able to take my mom to the Philippines. I was immersed in the culture completely. One of the more memorable conversations I had was with an older woman in my mom’s town. She had a lot of tattoos. They were fading, and the lines weren’t straight but they were nothing like any tattoos I’ve seen before. When I got back home I began researching it,

I connected to it in an interesting way. Mambabatok is a style of tattooing that is dying out. There are only two people left who were taught to make these tattoos in the traditional way (Engstrom 2019). It wasn't that I connected to mambabatok itself but rather the cultural extinction of it. Similarly to how I suppressed my other identities in order to conform. I wasn't able to learn the language, the dances, and all the things specific to my Bajan and Filipino culture. I didn't want it to die out in the same way that I didn't want my cultures to die out.

Mambabatok is made by placing a thorn from a calamansi plant into a wooden handle, dipping it in a mixture of charcoal and water, and then it is tapped into the skin using another stick as a hammering tool. In the past these tattoos were given as an award for defeating an enemy and a sign of beauty for women.

I use hair as a personal visual tool for attaining cultural coexistence. Styling my hair was one of the first moments of cultural consciousness. My mom had a hard time doing my hair. I would always tell her that I wanted straight hair like hers. I would get my hair permanently straightened for years. It wasn't until college that I questioned that way of thinking. It became a personal process for me to understand and accept my hair. It became almost a sort of trophy for me in the same way that the mambabatok was used.

This series was an attempt at emulating the process of mambabatok by appropriating it into portraiture. By denying the viewer the face of the sitter there are no racial identifiers. I attempted to further distance the sitter from racial identifiers by omitting color. The format is very uniform, the shoulders sit at about the same heights. I wanted it to mimic the symbolic designs of the tattoos. Mambabatok always has irregularities. They may be slightly off center or the lines may not be straight and clean as they would be here. I wanted to create something with the same effect. The amount of time and pain and work put in creates a piece that is unique from person to person. Making these portraits was very time consuming. It was hard for me to imagine that a woman who is over 100 year old has continued this practice for most of her life. I found myself having to take mental breaks, because after a while the hair became abstracted in the same way that people who have experienced the tattoos of Whang-Od have described in many articles and videos (Engstrom 2019).

**Figure 14:** *Oco dcdc vqm'Ugt kgu.'4242*

At first, I was only going to depict my family, but hair wasn't an issue specific enough to me. My mom made a group of friends that have been around as long as I can remember. They were all Filipino women with Black husbands. Their kids and I formed a group of our own, calling ourselves "halo- halo" a filipino dessert that translates to "mix mix". A huge part of our struggle with our Americanness and our hair stemmed from being biracial in America. We were told we weren't black enough to wear box braids or asian enough to wear traditional clothing. Hair became a trophy for all of us because it was also somewhere in the middle. Our hair tells the story of our struggle or acceptance of our hair whether we grew it out long or shaved it all off completely.

My cultural identity is something I continue to struggle with. It took me a while to understand that just as no person is the same, no mark is the same. Using art as a medium, I wanted to explore all of my cultural identities. By asking my parent's questions, I was able to better understand my parents and perhaps myself in the process. It led me to kamayan, a way of eating that became a symbol of the collision of my parent's cultures. Then the recognition of my own cultural compliance and conformity through the means of mambabatok. My journey with cultural coexistence is not linear. It's situational, cyclical, and ever changing. I wanted to create work that explores what it is to be Black, Asian, and American. My cultural identities are not separate parts of a puzzle but rather a mixture of them all at once.



Figure 1: *Mc{co cp}J cpf "Uwf {"11"x14"*



Figure 2: *Rj qvq"qhMco c{cp}2020*



**Figure 3:** *WygpukalMco c{cp"11"x14"*

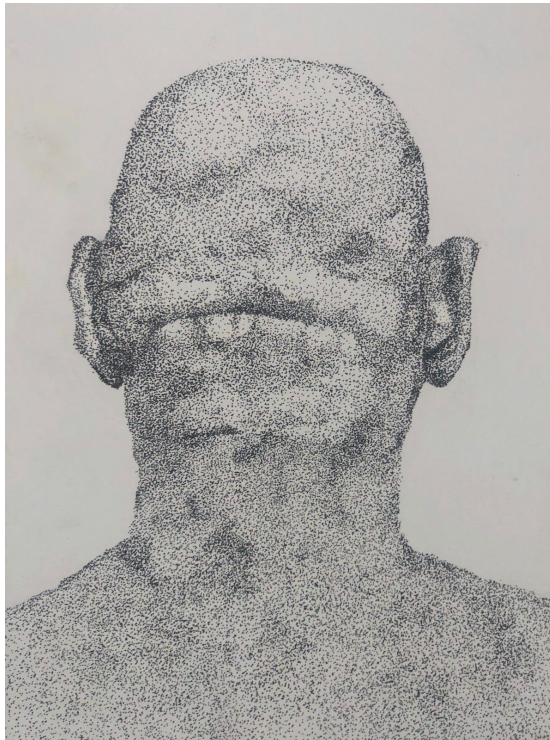
**Figure 4:** *Ko r gt lgev'Wygpuki'28"x40"* 2020



**Figure 5:** *Mco c{cp<Hco k{ 'Rqt vckv.'58öz.'6: ö'2020*



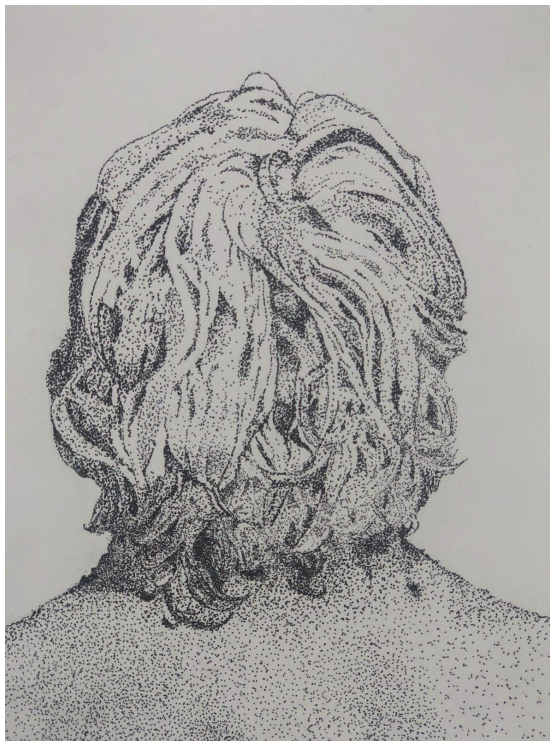
**Figure 6:** *Ughl'Rqt vck'lp'Tghgekq'ql'c'Ur qqp* 11"x14"



**Figure 7:** *Oco dcdvqm'Rqt vck'ql'Hcvj gt.* '11"x 14" 2020

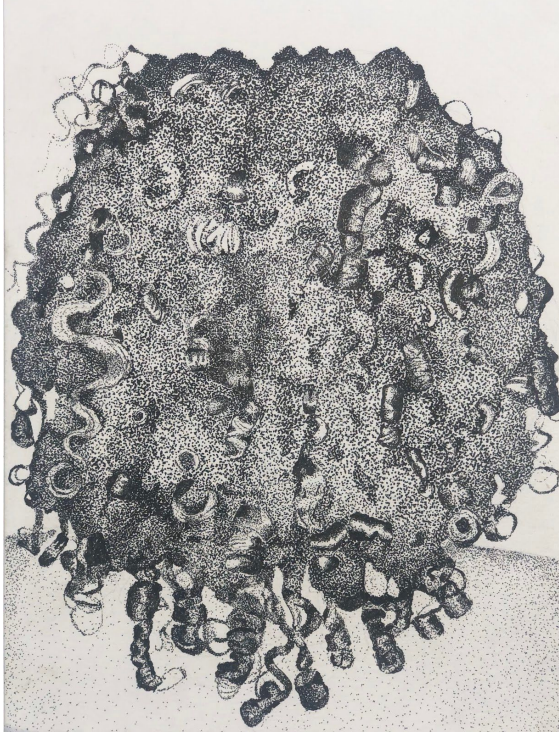


**Figure 8:** *Oco dcdcxqm'Rqt vck'qhlUkwt.* "11"x 14" 2020

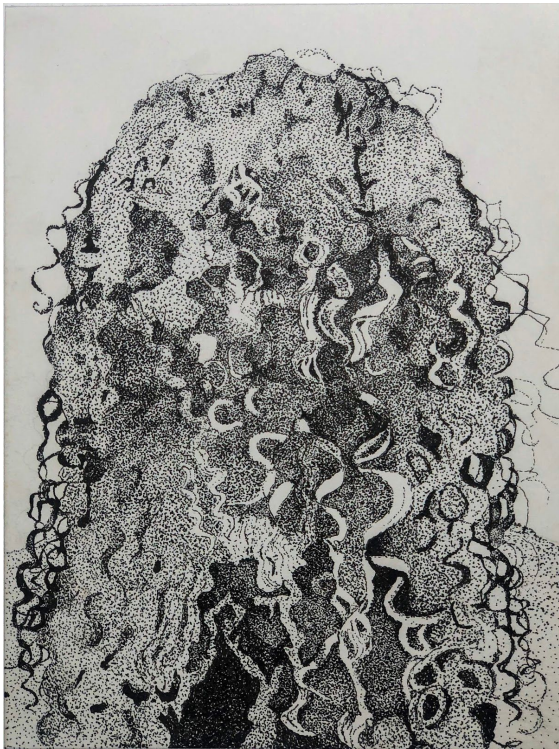


**Figure 9:** *Oco dcdcxqm'Rqt vck'qhlO qyj gt.* "11"x 14" 2020

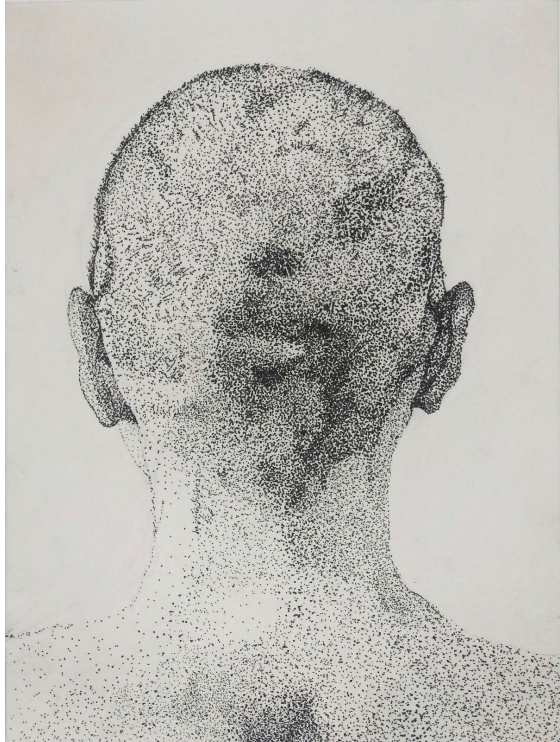




**Figure 10:** *Oco dcdcvqm'Ugh'Rqt vck: '11"x 14" 2020*



**Figure 11:** *Oco dcdcvqm'Rqt vck'qhlClc{k '11"x 14" 2020*



**Figure 12:** *Oco dcdcvqm'Rqt vck'qhl'Ucdt kpc.* "11"x 14" 2020



**Figure 13:** *Oco dcdcvqm'Rqt vck'qhl'Crzku.* "11"x 14" 2020



**Figure 14:** *Oco dcdcqmUgt kgu '4242*



**Figure 15:** *UgnRqt vck: '11"x14" 2020*

**Figure 16:** *Hcy gt "J qtf kpi "Ur qqp. "11"x14"*



**Figure 17:** Aliza Nisenbaum

*Nqpf qp "Wpf gt i t qwpf <Dt kzvqp "Uc vkqp" cpf "Xkevqt kc "Nkp g"Uc h, 74 3/4" x 142 1/8" 2019*



**Figure 18:** Amy Sherald  
*Rt gekqu' Lgy gnu'd{ 'vj g'Ugc '120' x 108' 2019*



**Figure 19:** Christine Sun Kim  
*Vj g'Uqwpf 'qhl'Rc kpwkpi 'Ukwpguu '49' x 49' (2017)*



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