

# Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

---

Volume 3  
Issue 1 *Generational Politics, Spring 2013*

Article 11

---

2013

## How to Kneel on the Earth

Michelle A. Kiang  
*Macalester College*, [mkiang@macalester.edu](mailto:mkiang@macalester.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kiang, Michelle A. (2013) "How to Kneel on the Earth," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol3/iss1/11>

This Expressions is brought to you for free and open access by the American Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

# How to Kneel on the Earth

by Michelle Kiang

---

*One: Get on your knees.*

I was never taught to bow to anyone except for when my grandmother passed away and we burned paper money in a cauldron in our backyard in Houston, Texas. My father instructed me to kneel on the earth and touch the ground with my forehead three times. The air was cold, the ground was dirty, and I didn't want to do it. But I bowed, my forehead touched the ground three times because I was afraid he would think that I did not respect my grandmother.

My grandmother was born in Beijing, China and grew up during the Second Sino- Japanese War. She went to the University of Beijing where she met my grandfather. Somehow, they escaped the communist regime in 1959, one year before they would graduate. They moved to Hong Kong, where my father was born, and then moved again to Venezuela in 1963. In Caracas, Venezuela my grandmother raised her son and three daughters. I was born in San Cristobal, Venezuela to a Chinese immigrant father and a Venezuelan mother. I grew up hearing stories of a land I could not fathom. China to me, was the mystical dragons and ladies painted on the vases displayed in our home. I imagined China in the sky, out of reach and extraordinary.

My father told me that my grandmother only allowed them to speak in Mandarin at their home in Caracas. She wanted to preserve their native tongue. Whenever he scolded me for speaking to him in English instead of in Spanish, I snapped at him, asking why he never taught us Chinese. This always silenced him.

The older I get, the more I empathize with my father's experience growing up uprooted. My father did not step foot in China until he was in his twenties. Although my father cooks us Chinese food, tells us Chinese stories, teaches us Chinese traditions I don't think he has ever felt Chinese, after all he was three years old when he moved to Venezuela.

*Two: Place your palms flat on the earth.*

In 2001, two years after Hugo Chavez was elected, my father moved us to Houston, Texas. I was eight years old. Growing up I had always known Chavez to be "a bad man", "a liar", and the reason my family became broken. Chavez to me, was the reason I was torn from my home country. My childhood, like my heritage, is split into geography. I am a Venezuelan- born American with a Chinese heritage. I measure my life experience in miles and my displacement anxiety in international calls.

I did not see Venezuela again until 2008 and by then I had already become American. To this day, my siblings and I only exchange English words even though it is not our native tongue. I don't remember why or when this happened. When I visit Venezuela, I feel out of place. Despite being fluent in Spanish, aspects of culture, habits, and slang words that should be familiar to any Venezuelan but aren't to me pushed me to the margins, made me gringa. My Venezuelan cousins tell me that I don't have a Venezuelan accent when I speak, that I sound

like a news reporter, neutral, a Latina face without a birthplace. Sometimes I wonder if I stopped being Venezuelan on purpose.

I understand my father better than he thinks I do. My father is a quiet, passive man, who still jokes like I am five years old. I have seen him angry few times in my life. He is the type of man who doesn't tell you he loves you but who buys you a poetry book by Neruda because you love poetry. I have never talked to him about his life. Until recently, have never thought how similar my father's uprooting is to mine. Both of us have swam across oceans looking for homes, lands we can call our own, Passports and citizenship, tradition, and language. I have found only silence and as for my father, he has grasped his heritage with the ownership of artifacts and art. It's like we are trying to remember something you have forgotten. At fifty years old, my father has yet to master the art of displacement, at nineteen, I have barely realized my displacement.

People often tell me that I can go back and acculturate myself, but that's not how it works. The Venezuela I remember lives in my memories and has since then stopped being mine. My father and I carry the shame of not knowing where we come from. Our shame is hidden by the telling stories we never experienced ourselves. We feel displaced from a land that no longer wants us back. My forehead on the cold earth in Houston, Texas would not transport me to China, or Venezuela. I bow to my history and heritage, to my grandmothers and grandfathers, they do not bow to me.

I don't remember what English sounded like before I could understand it and now I write, I speak, and I think in English. Although language is the most noticeable change in my acculturation to the great United States, the change in me runs deeper. I remember when I was in fifth grade my mother used to pack me an arepa, a traditional Venezuelan sandwich made of corn-meal and filled with cheese and ham. I used to eat it in secret, making sure that the lid of my lunchbox covered it as I picked out small pieces with my fingers and put them in my mouth. I remember asking my mother to pack me peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches instead. By sixth grade lost the accent. Slowly but surely, I chose to fit in. People grow surprised when I tell them I am not an American citizen. In English words, I write: Venezuela became but a memory.

My mother was born and lived the majority of her life in San Cristobal, Venezuela, the city where I was born and where all her brothers and sisters currently live. Founded in 1561, it rests on the Andes mountain range. She grew up in a family of thirteen kids, where the only income came from my grandfather. He was a truck driver. She is the only person I always speak to in Spanish. Unlike me, my mother made sure that the separation from her land would only temporary, that the Andean soil would always wait for her to return. Although I have been uprooted from the soil where I sprouted, my mother's roots grew and extended, across oceans.

I always wonder why my father married my curly-haired, green-eyed, Venezuelan mother when he could have married a Chinese girl and produced Chinese children. Although my father has always want-

# How to Kneel on the Earth

by Michelle Kiang

---

ed to be culturally Chinese there always existed a pressure for him to be more Venezuelan, the same pressure that made me lose my accent when I came to America. I'm not saying my parents didn't love each other, because they did and still do, but there are political motives even in love. Like my father, I am an outsider in a culture that my face should match. I am not Venezuelan enough or Chinese enough, or American enough, and I never will be. I imagine myself as a water lily in a pond full of black spotted coy that are nibbling at my roots. I float between continents and let the waves pull and push me home, wherever that is.

*Three: Touch the earth with your forehead three times.*

When my grandmother died in a car crash when she was visiting her hometown right outside Beijing on December of 2008 I realized the weight of all the shame I was carrying. She was, I felt, my only validation to my Chinese roots, and the only person left in my father's family who could tell me stories about a place I had never been to. Her death unraveled my shame of never feeling whole. When I was young, I thought that I had been born broken in half, one half was Chinese and the other Venezuelan. When I moved to Houston, two parts became four, I was Chinese, Venezuelan, American, Resident Alien. The feeling of never being whole is the same. Although we will never speak about it, my father and I will always mourn the death of my grandmother together, carrying confusion, doubt, and an everlasting sense of displacement.

Yet, as I kneeled and bowed to the burning paper, I knew she would forgive me because love is not a stationary feeling, because the earth beneath my feet could change but my family never would, and because I was ashamed of something that had never been anyone's fault. If only, someday my father and I could forgive ourselves for not being born whole. □