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Radical Relationality:
Genre and Affect in Asian American Historical Fiction of the Long Sixties

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Kai Hang Cheang

December 2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Radical Relationality:
Genre and Affect in Asian American Historical Fiction of the Long Sixties

by

Kai Hang Cheang

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, December 2018
Dr. Stephen Hong Sohn, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Weihsin Gui, Co-Chairperson

This dissertation argues that Asian American historical fiction of the Long Sixties does not merely depict the living and lived realities of immigrant lives, but also performs the social transformation sought by the activist groups that first articulated Asian American identity. Drawing on the founding documents of the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) at UC Berkeley, the first group to advance the collective identity category of “Asian American” and to define Asian America as a flexible “sliding structure,” my dissertation shows that the “sliding structure” is, and always has been, the means by which radicalism is expressed in Asian American literature. My analysis builds upon new formalism to demonstrate that “sliding” between narrative tropes and affective registers allows Asian American historical novelists of the Long Sixties to capture and critique the array of global conditions and national cultures that gave rise to Asian America.

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Introduction

What evolves is a concept of this “sliding structure”; getting to as many people as possible.

“An Understanding of AAPA August 24,” 1968

The term I would suggest to describe it is *structure of feeling*: it is as firm and definite as “structure” suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible part of our activity (48).

Raymond Williams’s *Long Revolution*, 1961

Kandice Chuh first publicized the term *radical relationality* in her keynote speech delivered at the 2017 American Studies Association. In that speech, she described a pedagogy of dissent as a point of departure for teacher-activists to invent radical ways of “being-with” other racial, gendered, and sexual minorities on campus to make lasting change by decentering the white supremacy the American university was founded upon. This system, as Chuh points out, was constructed “under the sign of Western Man while subjugating all others as not-yet and perhaps never to be capable of its possession” (158). As a decolonial praxis (developed out of the concept of “being-with” from the late José Esteban Muñoz) Chuh’s *radical relationality* is the guiding principle for teacher-activists when they break off from their institutions’ stratification to organize alliances of resistance with other minoritized subjects. *Radical relationality* is also their desired outcome.

My dissertation extends Chuh’s concept from its original context within critical university studies into the new formalist analysis of literary studies to theorize Asian

American radicalism as it exists within historical fiction. *Radical Relationality: Genre and Affect in Asian American Historical Fiction of the Long Sixties* is a performative project; its methodology and reading practice seek to enact Chuh's notion of "being-with." My project performs radical relationality by bringing together genre and affect theories, two fields that have seldom been considered in conjunction in Asian American Studies, in order to excavate the radical relations in Asian America since its foundation in the Long Sixties as expressed across space and time.¹ As I locate Asian American radicalism's impact on the American cultural imaginary in the narrative and meta-narrative levels of literary texts, I hope to show the transitivity of the Asian American Movement within and beyond the page, from its beginnings as an activist campaign on campus, to the lives it takes on in fiction as it is passed on from one generation to the next, moving from one medium to another.

Following critics of literary realism beginning with György Lukács, Gail Day, and Yoon Sun Lee, I understand transitivity in aesthetic and social terms. Building on Lukács, Day (2011) defines transitivity in opposition to "still life" (216), representations which reify the politically repressive, decadent tradition of the bourgeoisie. For Day, transitivity, includes the "activities and struggles of human relations" (210);

¹ For projects that put affect and cultural form into meaningful conversation, see Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, especially its first chapter on flat emotion and flat tone in *Herman Melville's The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* and Lauren Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* on patriotism and the genre of pilgrimage narrative. For those within Asian American studies, see Karen Shimakawa's treatment of abjection and theatrical performance in *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage* and Patricia P. Chu's discussion of feelings and bildungsromans in *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*.

representations of these relations are accordingly dynamic: they seek to contest dominant expressions and replace them with authentically realist art that acknowledges the “unattainability” of Lukács’s totality (211) and delineates aspects of the Real by “connect[ing] the partial, particular, and fragmentary phenomenon” (Lee 471) of history during (rare) moments of political transformation. Another way of putting this is that the subject matter of Lukácsian realism is the elaboration of history during its moments of change. The representation of an unfolding historical process is difficult, to say the least; in novels, for example, the spirit of an era is usually condensed into a thing, such as a character. That character then becomes the subject and object of his/her time: object because he/she is the product of the period, subject when he/she attempts to change it. Historical novels that portray the tension between their protagonist and that figure’s historical predicaments are therefore doing something more than plainly reflecting the past as it is: they are also repurposing the past into a representation that draws attention to “the condition for social transitivity” (Day 211), to, in other words, the conditions necessary for historical transformation to occur. Attention to the dynamic treatment of history is especially relevant to the analysis of Asian American fictions of the Long Sixties—a period when the activist foundations of the community were first inaugurated. A Lukácsian understanding of the historical change depicted in these the novels allows us to see it as a process that is still unfolding.

My project illuminates the social transitivity in the Asian American Movement by calling attention to how the activist energy that inaugurated the Movement lives on in different configurations—from the social to the fictional and back again. The project does

so by delineating the links between Asian American aesthetics and activism, thereby forging a radical relation between two fields that are seldom considered together. I argue that an understanding of Asian American historical fiction is central to any complete reckoning with the community's radicalism: Asian American historical fiction's (re)imaginings of individuals who came to political consciousness during the Long Sixties speak back to and inform the trajectory of Asian American activism and identity today. The social transitivity enacted in Asian American historical fiction is, as this project will detail, expressed in what I call a "sliding" aesthetic motion, an aesthetic approach that shifts between genre forms, temporal positions, and points of view in an effort to capture what Lee calls "the partial, particular and fragmentary" dimensions of unfolding historical reality.

New Formalism in Asian American Literary Studies

Before turning to the radical histories and literary forms of Asian America, it is imperative that we first think about what we mean when we call a person and a cultural production "Asian American." In literary criticism, generations of Asian American scholars have used the term as a springboard to launch their critiques to contest both the position of ethnic literature in the American literary imaginary and the limits and potential of Asian American identity.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim's "Assaying the Gold: Or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature" (1993) is perhaps the first expression of a critic's discontent with Asian American as a "signifying suffix" (162) to a heterogeneous corpus of literature. Taking an ethnic-specific approach, Lim's article sketches out the "master plots" (153)

that categorize the narrative features of Asian anglophone writing in the U.S. by the author's points of origin. As Lim enumerates: oppression is the concern that conventionally preoccupies literature by Japanese Americans, while the pursuit of early immigrant history is a primary concern of Chinese American writers, and the recovery of American colonial experience is common to work by Filipino Americans. The most intriguing category, perhaps, is the last one in Lim's list, which she calls "pan-Asian" American literature. Referring to novels and poems from the wave of rising authors in the eighties and nineties like Maxine Hong Kingston and Cathy Song—those recognized for their experimentation in craft—"pan-Asian" American literature is Lim's placeholder for anomalous texts whose shapes no longer fit neatly into the forms and themes that have been typically associated with ethnic writers. Given such anomalies, Lim predicts that Asian American as a literary label is "already collapsing under the weight of its own contradiction" (162) due to the community's increasing heterogeneity, multiplicity and hybridity.

Lim's prophesy did not come true: "Asian America" is still going strong as an umbrella term. And in direct contradiction to Lim's call to modify the signifying affix, Susan Koshy in "The Fiction of Asian American Literature" (1996) argues that it is necessary to strategically retain Asian America as a referent to a "fictional notion of unity" (318). Koshy lauds Lim's "additive approach" (318) for being the first in the field to give equal attention to the vast array of ethnic literatures that constitute Asian American literature. But Koshy worries that such a methodology is slow in encapsulating Asian America's changing reality and demographics. To address this problem, Koshy

proposes a paradigm shift to what she calls “strategic deferral” (315), one that keeps the meaning of Asian America open for debate, and thereby permits “the Asian American identity and its concomitant literature [to] come into being” accordingly (316).

Here, Koshy deploys what Mark Jerng (2010) later terms the phenomenological approach to Asian American literature, an approach that attends to the political, socioeconomic and affective environment in which the multitude of Asian American experience is produced and perceived.² The breadth of cultural valences that Koshy explores in her article is likely responsible for its lasting effect in Asian American Studies and ethnic literary studies writ large. Though Koshy’s article does not use the exact wording of “new formalism,” its deployment of Asian American fiction to understand the construction of Asian America as a fictional construct breaks new ground in Asian American literary studies. It was not until Colleen Lye’s 2008 article “Racial Form” that the terminology of new formalism is introduced into the field.³ According to Lye, new

² For a full account of the phenomenological account to race, read Mark C. Jerng’s “Nowhere in Particular: Perceiving Race, Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft*, and the Question of Asian American Fiction” in Stephen Hong Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht’s special issue *Theorizing Asian American Fiction for Modern Fiction Studies*.

³ Lye’s new formalist venture is in keeping with the larger field’s renewed interests in literary new formalism—a movement that began around 2000 in literary studies to keep literature as one of the central objects of materialist investigations in the current interdisciplinary age. That movement began with Susan J. Wolfson’s pair of 1998 article “What’s Wrong With Literary Formalism” and “What’s Good About Literary Formalism” where she sought to rescue traditional formalism from its conservative situation. Later in *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* Wolfson puts the studies of literary form into use for her interdisciplinary studies, deploying form as an entry point into discussing topics ranging from self-expression to cultural revision in the 18th century. In her 2008 article, Marjorie Levinson’s “What is New Formalism” challenges the label of new formalism. In the piece she surveys scholarship produced under the label of new formalism and wonders if new formalism is new at all, or just a “sectarianism” (568) borne out of a rebellion against new historicism.

formalism reacts against the type of cultural interpretation that extracts ethnographic information from minority writers to explain characters' motives, a mode of analysis that is common to work across ethnic studies. New formalism, per Lye, is concerned with essentializing reading practices that elide ethnic writers' aesthetic investments in their texts. These cultural assumptions may or may not be ill-intentioned, but they become more problematic when they separate minority writers from major authors of the dominant culture, situating the former's work in an ethnic ghetto, when in fact that work is in every way linked up to the circulation and distribution of capital and ideas which they share with the latter.

To rectify this issue, Lye advocates for an analytical practice that returns to "the ethnic text more transformative kinds of agency" (94). For Lye, "new formalism" seeks to "put form to work in theorizing what is and has been Asian American literature, and this performance means engaging even more deeply in interdisciplinary inquiry and research" (95). Lye cites Keith Lawrence and Floyd Chang's introduction to *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature* (2009) as exemplifying the interdisciplinary method of new formalism, one comprised of

a variety of approaches [including] New Historical, feminist, neo-Marxist, neo-Freudian, postcolonial, ethno-historical that balance and contextualize "close reading" (by affording them immediacy and cultural currency) without de-emphasizing or displacing the literary analysis (or the corresponding primary texts). (93)

The latest notable work that joins the debate is Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015) which champions leftist approaches to the study of literary forms, arguing that that to survive in a given system requires one to know the formation and the innerworkings of the said system.

The new formalist turn in literary studies has produced a wave of monographs on poetic form: these works include Josephine Park's *Apparitions of Asian: Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (2008), Timothy Yu's *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (2009), Joseph Jeon's *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry* (2012), and Dorothy J. Wang's *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary American Poetry* (2015), Elda Tsou's *Unquiet Tropes: Form, Race, and Asian American Literature* (2015), and Amy C. Tang's *Repetition and Race: Asian American Literature After Multiculturalism* (2016). Although each of these projects sets out to achieve very different goals (some historical, others sociological), they all converge in their common method of locating rhetorical figures and literary devices as points of departure to make arguments about Asian Americans poets' expressions of their agency and subjugation under the U.S. racial and capitalist strata. What marks these critics' approaches as new formalist, then, is their attention to the ways Anglophone Asian poets interact with classical Greek rhetorical devices (as in in Tsou's monograph), universal figures (such as Asia in Park), styles (the avant-garde in Yu's), tropes (foreignness in Jeon's), and techniques (like parodies and allegories among others in Tang's and Wang's) that are commonly used across literary periods and genres even though they may or may not be habitually associated with Asian American literature.

My dissertation participates in this new wave of formalist scholarship by turning to genre fiction. More specifically, it engages with Asian American genre fiction that incorporates the *mise-en-scene* of the Long Sixties, an era that—according to Christopher

Connery and Rob Wilson—began with the local, anti-colonial outbreak in Vietnam against the French in Dien Bien Phu in 1954—and ended with the death of Mao (a longstanding symbol of a “Third-World” order) in 1976—to think through the period’s implications on the foundation of Asian America and its concomitant literature and identity.

If, as Connery says in the book chapter “World Sixties,” the Long Sixties distinguishes itself from other periods by the “co-presence” (76) of resistance across the globe, the eruptive and inexhaustible energies circulating around and between the developed and developing worlds, then, how do those anti-authoritarian impulses make an impact on Asian immigrants in the U.S., a group that is prized by the nation-state as the model minority? In what ways can we consider these tumultuous global movements as the undercurrents that conditioned the emergence of the politicized Asian America, a social formation that emerged parallel to and collides with the model minority myth? My dissertation attempts to answer these questions by using new formalism (mostly by drawing on genre and affect theories) to interpret the histories in and figurations of Asian American genre fictions.

New formalist analysis of fiction has made important contributions to the studies of Asian American identity. Christopher Lee’s monograph *The Semblance of Identity: Aesthetic Mediation in Asian American Literature* (2012) is one of the foremost examples of the approach. Following Koshy’s call to strategically defer the meaning of the “Asian American,” Lee theorizes Asian American subjecthood using György Lukács’s notion of “semblance” to suggest that the truth of Asian American identity may well be better

understood as an illusion. Referencing the famed Chinese novelist Eileen Chang's discursive positioning of self to construct an ethnic identity that is recognizable for her American audience, Lee compares the truth of Asian American identity to the concept of the ideal in aesthetic philosophy. He then argues that the figure of the "idealized critical subject" (9) in Asian American fiction represents (and in turn parodies) that ideal. The "idealized critical subject," per Lee, "embod[ies] a set of claims about identity, subjectivity, and oppositional social/political movements" (9); in other words, that figure concedes the impossibility of an authentic embodiment of Asian American identity and then attacks the rubrics that make an all-too-easy and clear-cut identity boundary between the real and the fake.

Lee's monograph offers a post-identity perspective on Asian American subjecthood as a position of critique that exposes the ruse of authenticity's promise. The theoretical premise in *The Semblance of Identity* allows Lee to extend the term Asian American to include a diverse cast of artists—such as Eileen Chang, who relocated from Shanghai to Los Angeles by way of Hong Kong in the late seventies while continuing to write in Mandarin and Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist—who would not otherwise be considered together. Valuable as it is, Lee's maximalist approach fails to reckon with the historical reality that led to the rise of Asian America as a political affiliation in the Sixties. The imprecision in the definition of what qualifies as a piece of Asian American literature is problematic: one of the outcomes is the occlusion of other Asian writings on the American continent. Speaking specifically about the case of Asian Canadian literature, Iyko Day's 2007 article exhorts us to better define the referent of the

term Asian American for the better articulation of the development of the Asian American Movement and the term's difference from other geopolitical designations: she says, "we must acknowledge that there are real-life referents of the term 'Asian American,' which include its hard-won role as a state-recognized minority category for civil rights monitoring and its more negative existence in U.S. society as an undifferentiated 'foreign' population subject to racial hostilities" (73).

Following Day, my project centers radical history in Asian American literature by considering genre fictions set against the backdrop of the Long Sixties, or works that are pre-occupied with the vicissitudes surrounding the politicized emergence of identity and community. Particularly, my analysis homes in on the interactions between genre fiction and existing forms, conventions and concerns in the American literary canon, for insights into the form of the *longue durée* of the Asian American Movement.

The genre vessels I have assembled in my textual archive that convey the radical history of Asian American range from the predictable to the perhaps-surprising: they include the immigrant family romance (which has been taken as synonymous with Asian American literature by cultural critics inside and outside of the field) alongside other popular genres that are not often considered through the lens of the ethnic imaginary. These include the road novel, noir fiction, the documentary fiction, and science fiction. I focus on these unexpected genres because they are all genres associated with depictions of the counterculture, which took place alongside the Asian American Movement but did not cohere with it given the counterculture's habitual Orientalization. Countercultural genres, however, are important because they offer historiographic accounts of the Long

Sixties. By reading countercultural texts from Asian American authors, my project not only reclaims the radical history of Asian America, it also reframes Asian American experience as central to counterculture. If Connery is correct that counterculture is indeed the “inroad” toward the subversion “of capitalist domination” and that it shows us how that is subversion “is felt” (92) then countercultural genres by Asian Americans help to recall and remember Asian American’s long participation in the radical tradition of refusal and resistance, while gesturing toward the ways radicalism might define its future.

My dissertation’s goal is similar to the new formalist projects that have come before it in that my project joins them in investigating how Asian American novelists refract familial and communal issues through countercultural forms to reimagine literary accounts of political struggle that also carry with them the aura of the Sixties; at the same time, it is different from these projects in that it takes a step forward in framing the case of Asian America as a problem of referentiality.

Since the beginning of the Lim-Koshy debate, the boundaries of Asian America have remained at the heart of the problem of how to define a racial group and its relations to a textual body. Lim’s method tries to set borders for Asian American literature by reserving space in the field for each Asian ethnicity in the cultural imaginary. When dealing with anomalous cases—Lim tried to create the exceptional category of “pan-Asian” American literature to account for them as post-immigration. Koshy takes the opposite approach: rather than matching a type of experience to an ethnic group, Koshy radically loosens the grip of the definition and lets history decide what makes Asian American literature Asian American. My dissertation hopes to find a middle ground

between the two by anchoring the signification of Asian America on coalition. Departing from Sau-ling Wong's declaration of the corpus of Asian American literature as a single "textual coalition" (9) that is actually comprised of a multitude of anglophone Asian writing in the U.S., my project takes the political aspect of coalition seriously and uses it as a guide to assemble an archive of fictions that hearken back to Asian America's historical origin as a political unit strategically formed as a coalition. Analyzing the affective and aesthetic dimensions of the coalitional structure of Asian America with historical fiction will open up a new path to see the changes that the formation of Asian American identity and sociality make in myriad institutions. Given the time and size that some of these transformations take, they can only be made seen with a distance.

Asian America's Sliding Structure and Literary Sliding in Asian American Historical Fiction

According to the *Asian American Movement 1968* digital archive, the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) arose out of the constellation of 60s-era radical movements in the San Francisco Bay Area, including the Third World Liberation Front Strikes, the Free Speech Movement, the black-power movement, the anti-war movement, and the anti-poverty movement. Inspired by these activist movements, UC Berkeley graduate students Yuki Ichioka and Emma Gee decided to form the AAPA to further the cause of equity for all Asians in the U.S. and worldwide, joining forces with existing Northern California Asian activism of the Japanese American Citizens League and the United Farm Workers. But unlike these groups, which were dedicated to advocating for a specific ethnicity or occupation, the AAPA put its emphasis on pan-Asian coalition,

which it aimed to achieve by “forg[ing] an openly anti-imperialist political organization for all Asian nationalities, one that could stand on an equal basis with other dominant Third World groups at the same time as part of the international Third World liberation movement for self-determination” (*Asian American Movement 1968*).

The AAPA’s coalitional orientation was structured by empathy. This ethos was best articulated by Richard Aoki, a member of the Black Panther Party and the AAPA during a speech made at a rally on July 28, 1968 when he defined Asian Americans as those who “support the struggle of the Afro-American people, the Chicanos, and the American Indians to attain freedom, justice and equality,” and are “unconditionally against the war in Vietnam.” Aoki’s words may not be representative of all the officials in the AAPA, but the public statement that the organization subsequently released on August 24, 1968 made clear its intention to organize Asian American identity and the Asian American subject position on the basis of empathetic identification. In the statement “An Understanding of AAPA,” the group’s cabinet members expressed frustration over “tirades of rhetoric which lead to confusion” (1). In the hopes of reducing ideological disagreements, the statement sought to de-centralize powers within the group and upheld “effective action as leadership”—with effective action meaning the spread of democracy including the work of “writing, speaking, talking to friends, or plain secretarial labor.” The end game of the AAPA, as the statement posited, was to transform the alliance into a “sliding structure,” “getting” democracy “to as many people as possible.” Those looking for an understanding of the AAPA in definite terms are destined to be disappointed by the statement; in fact, it reads like a page taken out of Koshy’s

article: in emphasizing the importance of democracy through coalition, the writer takes pains not to draw a boundary around Asian American identity. This strategic deferral invested the AAPA (and thereby the Asian America that it invented) with an elasticity that enabled it to reach beyond San Francisco and the 1960s.

Under the AAPA's activist vision, Asian America is a form that is living—present whenever Asian peoples are organizing to articulate grievances and make collective demands on behalf of minorities at home and oppressed populations abroad, enacting and thereby maintaining—whether consciously or not—the “sliding structure” invented by the AAPA. Sliding, according *OED*, means to “pass from one place or point to another with movement.” What is being passed on is the empathy that motivated Gee and Ichioka to establish the AAPA in the first place. When situated in relation to the radical terms of genesis, Asian America can be seen as an ever-evolving structure, with its superstructure folding in new ideas and affinities from its base, which is comprised of a demographic that is evolving. This structuralist reading of Asian America is in keeping with Lisa Lowe's pivotal claim that Asian America is heterogeneous, while also grounding her observation in Raymond Williams's notion of “the structure of feeling.” If a structure of feeling is “the culture of a period” and “the particular living result of all the elements in the generational organization” (48); then Asian America is that cultural product of the Long Sixties, resulting from Asian activists living in close proximity to political activists from a range of ethnicities, with panoply of political aims.

Defined this way, Asian America poses a problem of representation for writers. Given that Asian America's totality is beyond reach—ephemeral, ever-morphing—the

only way that literary texts can come close to grasping it is through the mediation of individual persons and things operating within the sliding structure of the affiliation. In order to objectively and ethically capture Asian America's radical history, writers of fiction must "slide," too, oscillating between perspectives, personas, tones, and temporalities, shifting to depict and enact the ideological transfers and countermotions that obtain between revolutionaries and their communities. How, then, does this "sliding" motion register in literary texts?

Sarah Chihaya's "Slips and Slides" (2018) offers some answers in its reading of Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer*, a novel, like the ones in my archive, that is set in the Long Sixties. In her article, Chihaya focuses on three levels of sliding in and around *The Sympathizer*: including the titular character's voice that changes from "I" to "We," Nguyen's own double identity as a writer and a scholar, as well as the novel's constant swings between a range of genres such as the mystery novel, the immigrant novel, historical fiction, tragedy and comedy. Chihaya approaches these levels of multiplicity step-by-step: first by explaining the double-minded-ness, or double-allegiance that the titular character avows. Commenting on the protagonist's irreconcilable inner division that drives him to slide from one subject position to another, the critic says, "the slide is not necessarily sly; instead it suggests a betrayal of an illusory binary" (367). By the logic of analogy, Chihaya then goes onto draw a parallel between "the slippage between personas" and that "between genres" in the novel to forward the idea that sliding—whether controllable or uncontrollable—is a form that reflects the "multiple allegiances that Nguyen's complex subject contains" (367). The complex subject Chihaya refers to

here has a multiplicity of meanings: it not only is a referent to Nguyen's character, Nguyen's management of himself (as a critic and a creative writer), but also to the dizzying world of the Long Sixties that was charged with the co-existence and clashes between ideologies and movements.

Chihaya does not explicitly state that the motion of sliding is reflexive of the "sliding structure" of Asian America, but the connection is obvious: especially in her explanation of how sliding is the manifestation of "disconcerting convergence" (367)—an amalgamation that, I would add, is emblematic of Asian America's foundation as a collective. Historical fiction that reflects the emergence of Asian America from the anti-racist and Third Worldist tradition must deploy a sliding aesthetic in order to represent the multiplicity of ideologies that undergird Asian American empathy and the many inter-personal/inter-group allegiances that catalyze the community. Sliding in *The Sympathizer* is a strategic aesthetic maneuver that enables the text to capture the larger Asian American corpus of ethical "narrativizations and historizations" of the Long Sixties that, at once, take in and "confront" the "totality around [Asian America] and within [it]" (369).

As a literary aesthetic strategy, "sliding" is symbolic of the negotiation that Asian American radical artists and activists have to engage in when expanding the base of the community as they confront and contend with existing cultural structures, systems and conditions in the process of bringing about change. This brand of radicalism is markedly different from *Aiiiiiiiiii*'s proclamation of Asian American cultural nationalism, which, at its core is a project of identity difference that assumes that Asian American will be

excluded. In the years since *Aiiiiiiiii*'s publication, Asian Americans have gained status in myriad institutions and have been widely incorporated by the nation state as the model minority, changes that suggest that Chin and others' separatist radicalism may have lost traction.

Sliding as a transitive motion towards change articulates a counter-hegemonic labor that takes Asian American's ambivalence and abjection into account. In literature especially, that labor of negotiating is, to borrow a term from Jinqi Ling's *Narrating Nationalism: Ideology and Form in Asian American Literature* (1998), one of "intertextuality" (34), a process in which transformation is carried out by Asian American literature as it expresses "[entanglement] with mainstream language, cultural tradition" (15).

Unlike the vision of cultural nationalism articulated by *Aiiiiiiiii*, under which subversion is avowed to be "self-contained" and "self-referential" (Ling 6), the Asian American radicalism my project uncovers in retrospective accounts of the Long Sixties is one of transformation, one that is dependent on a simultaneous deployment and disruption of existing cultural and ideological traditions. As exemplified by *The Sympathizer*, the historical fictions that I study below slide temporally and aesthetically from the Sixties to the late 20th and early 21st century, a perspective shift that signals that an Asian American radical vision of change can only be (made) legible and describable with temporal and aesthetic distance.

All of the fictions in my textual archive slide across time and between vantage points and genres. Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* is set in 1968- and published in

1996; Susan Choi's *American Woman* 1974- and 2004; Nina Revoyr's *Southland* 1938-99 and 2008; Ed Lin's *Snakes Can't Run* 1976- and 2010; Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* 1968-77 and 2010, and *Siamese Twins and Mongoloids: Three Abstractions on Asian America* 1971- and 2014. Each of these texts reclaims for Asian America the countercultural genres that have traditionally excluded Asian Americans; as they revise these genres, the authors invest them with more inclusive ideologies, and objections to the original ones.⁴ At the same time, this process of revision, and the shifts in perspective, tone, and temporality that attend it, cause some slippage in the genre categories of the project's archive. Sliding, then, applies to the novels' historical delay, narrative structures, genre categorization as well as their effects on readers. For instance, Choi's *American Woman* can be read as an internment narrative, a narrative of intergenerational conflict, a literary account of the Patty Hearst case, and a road novel. Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* shifts in between the formats of fictional prose and a documentary script. Nina Revoyr's *Southland*, again, another genre re-mix: part noir fiction, part internment fiction, part lesbian literature. And perhaps strangest of them all is Gen's *Mona*, a fiction that is and is not a conventional immigrant family romance—depending

⁴ Wai Chee Dimock would call this “re-genreing” (1380). She came up with that term in her 2007 *PMLA* introductory essay to the special issue of *Re-Mapping Genre* where she describes “re-genreing” as a “alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory” (1380). My project takes stock from Dimock's thinking about genre as a field of knowledge that travels in the “exogenous” sense (1380). Her thought about genres being “expressive forms that human beings collectively inherit” supplements Ling's theory about the negotiated subjectivity of Asian American in literature as one that has to be articulated in conjunction with the dominant culture; Dimock's theory allows for a complementary reading to Ling's account: that would suggest that Asian American historical writers who live with and write along the radical tradition have in fact taken inspiration from not only their Asian American predecessors but also other informants (like the counterculture).

whether one stops reading at the end of the last chapter, “Chapter 15: Discoveries,” or the epilogue that is appended to it.

Ultimately, these genre slippages testify to the manifold ways the sliding aesthetic defines Asian American historical fiction of the Long Sixties and enacts Asian American radicalism. And just as the sliding aesthetic enables Asian American writers to depict and perform Asian America’s activist identity, it is also an ethical means of approaching what Nguyen, via Toni Morrison, calls “re-memory”—the remembrance of someone else’s past. Especially for authors like Revoyr and Choi who are too young to recall directly the Long Sixties—they were both born in 1969—the sliding aesthetic enables them to reflect critically on, and reimagine, the past in light of contemporary ethical priorities. Their re-remembrances of the era depict Asian American characters who reflect dialectically upon the limits and potential of empathy toward local and international radical causes. Also true to the form of the sliding is the subject-hood of the characters in novels: like the hero of Nguyen’s novel, they are sympathizers. Some become more grounded people after they are awakened to racial consciousness (like Jackie Ishida in *Southland*), some are burnt out by the fervency of activism (like Mona Chang), while others like Robert Chow in *Snakes Can’t Run* and Jenny Shimada in *American Woman* struggle to find a footing into to the Movement.

Asian American Realism

The multiplicity that Asian American historical fiction embodies captures the reality of radical Asian America as a living tension situated at the center of the push and pull between global forces across the East-West axis. Asian American realist novelists of

the Long Sixties provide a peripheral vantage point to view and feel nations and systems as linked rather than as disparate as U.S. Cold War politics want us to believe.

In the special issue of “peripheral realism” for *MLQ* (2012), Yoon Sun Lee argues that the vantage point of peripherality is central to Asian American realism. In her view, Asian American realism is able to capture national and global dynamics because it is more than a plain reflection of Asian American lives: it is a transitive mediation that stems from the world we live in, condensed and crystalized in the fictional world, and vice versa. Lee contends that Asian American realism is defined by a response against “ethnic reification” (431). In this view, the multiplicity of Asian American literature upends the stable representation of race that stereotype depends on. Still, in this telling, Asian American realism isn’t entirely free from the grip of capitalism and its apparatuses. Indeed, as Mark Chiang reminds us, Asian American literature became a unified field and began to accrue cultural capital because of UC Berkeley’s and SF State’s institutionalization of Asian American Studies. The categorization and professionalization of Asian American literature as a field, as such, is a counter-insurgent practice by the university and neoliberal society to contain the Asian American Movement initiated by AAPA.

Lee’s analysis shows us that Asian American realism is stuck in an awkward position, defined both by an articulation of self-determination against hegemony, and by the knowledge of racial difference made possible by institutionalization. Yet in Asian American realism’s contradictory status, there are means of subverting capitalist domination. Lee argues that in order to identify and act upon this potentiality, we must

read Asian American realism alongside the socialist tradition of realism. Asian American realism, according to her, especially after 1960, is born out of a similar structure as Lukácsian socialist realism. Like historical novels of the democratic humanist tradition, Asian American literature stems from a transitional “structural characteristic” (418): like the epic form that Lukács discusses at length (with *Don Quixote* as the prime example), Asian American literature focuses on themes like dislocation, and is situated at a wide “historical and spatial frame of reference” (418). Taking *The Woman Warrior* (1976) as an example, a novel that, like the texts in my archive, is set in the (diegetic present of) the Long Sixties, Lee argues that Asian American realism derives not from the positive but from the negative, or “the interconnections that lead from wholes to parts and back again” (418). The critic shows us that Kingston’s text slides from the protagonist’s personal struggle against sexism and racism in the workplace to the looting that happened in China during the Cultural Revolution, from the backdrops of mythical China to the reality of the U.S. civil rights movement, from fiction to non-fiction, *The Woman Warrior* embodies Asian American realism’s oscillation between individuals, systems, worlds, and forms.

What Lee suggests but does not say is that *The Woman Warrior* demonstrates an awareness of capitalism’s persistence that Lukácsian socialist fictions do not. With that, Kingston is able to offer up a dynamic portrayal of the *longue durée* of an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-misogynistic Asian American Movement whose exhortation to end oppression in the U.S. (and, in that matter China) will not cease until the capitalist heteropatriarchy wanes. *The Woman Warrior* is at its best in its dramatization of that the

dizzying dissonance caused by the convergence between systems; they are manifested in the moments when Kingston trips over the discrepancies between the world she lives in, and the world that she comes from. These episodes in turn engender Kingston's own "talk stories" in *Warrior*—stories that slide between reality and the fantasy as demanded by her awakening to a new communal order that is Asian America.

Building on Lee's argument, I contend that such historical fictions embody Asian American realism because they are not only passive objects; their sliding structures and aesthetics also facilitate exchange between the realms of the aesthetic and lived reality. In summarizing Lee's article, Jed Esty and Colleen Lye note that Asian American realism "mediates and fills the space between connective tissues" (284). The chapters in this project analyze the literary forms and the affective "tissues" that connect up the constituents in radical Asian America. These connectives are important not only for representing Asian American radicalism, but also for performing it.

Raymond Williams tells us that a "long revolution" is all about making a new world order in personal and social terms. Asian American historical fiction of the radical tradition is helping to facilitate that long revolution. To make that case, each of my chapter focuses on an instance of interpersonal/inter-species encounter as the activism expands and evolves over the course of time. More specifically, I focus on the inter-generational, inter-ethnic, inter-racial, and planetary dimensions of Asian America in each chapter—with exclusive foci on their contradictory push toward and pull away from the U.S. capitalist nation-state, along with the array of affects connecting characters within the text and obtaining between the text and the reader. Just as Asian American

identity is characterized by a sliding structure, so Asian American realism manifests through interpersonal/inter-species relations defined by the struggle to achieve a praxis of co-existence that respects individuality and coheres differences. This struggle produces a range of emotions and orientations that go beyond the empathy.

The analysis of affect that registers a range of emotions beyond empathy therefore is central to my examination of the temporal and aesthetic dimensions of the radical Asian America's *longue durée*; my project pairs the study of genre in the fictions that make up my textual archive with attention to the affects within them. This interdisciplinary method is in keeping with Asian American literary studies' recent attention to genre fiction (such as in Betsy Huang's 2010 monograph *Contesting Genres in Asian American Fiction*) and to affect (for instance, Jeffrey Santa Ana's 2015 book *Racial Feelings: Asian American In a Capitalist Culture of Emotion*).⁵

In acknowledgement of Huang's treatment of immigrant family romance as Asian American literature's "generic sui generis" (1), and Santa Ana's specific positioning of

⁵ In *Racial Feelings*, Jeffrey Santa Ana focuses on a wide range of emotions as reactions against the pursuit of happiness, which he (following Ahmed) takes to be that which overdetermines immigrant lives; these emotions include anger, anxiety, shame, fear and guilt. For Santa Ana, they are "ancestral feelings," feelings that people of Asian descent in the U.S. are made to feel by the capitalist and white-supremacist milieu around them. Following Michael Omi and Howard Winant's formulation of racial formation, Santa Ana's account of ancestral feeling is therefore static, passive in that affect is like ideology, passed from the super-structure to the base. My approach is different from his in that mine is aligned with Colleen Lye's theorization of racial form. I see feelings as a form (rather than a formation) that is charged with tension, prone to both fossilization and change. To capture that, I posit the "cybernetic fold" (Eve Sedgwick's system theory) as a better way to approach Asian America as a structure of feeling that is "differentiable but not originally differentiated" (12-13) from the larger political and affective economy in the country.

happiness as the affect that Asian Americans are supposed to pursue and disseminate, my project begins with a reading of Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* as an anomalous immigrant family romance with two endings. I pay specific attention to the affectivity between the mother and daughters in the Chang's family, and the differing affect (one sad, the other happy) that the novel's two endings (namely "Chapter 15: Discoveries" and "epilogue") forward. Doing so opens up a new reading of the novel as historical fiction, throwing into relief the Asian American realism that I described above by showing the conflict between the capitalist values that Asian diasporic family traditionally subscribes to, and the democratic humanism that the civil rights movements arouses in American-born Asians like Mona Chang. The intention of my reading is to estrange the imaginary of Asian America from its stereotypical preoccupation with the family and its literary fixation on immigrant family romance, and, in turn, to acknowledge and taxonomize "the multiple affiliations and outcomes" (Ling 6) borne out of Asian immigrants and their descendants' reengagement with radical forms of politics and cultures.

How, then, does Asian American fiction represent an Asian American sociality that is bigger than the nuclear family with a network that is wider than that of the bloodline? What narrative forms will it take to mimic the cognitively estranging referent of a radical Asian America that is defined by a sliding in motion?

Chapters 2 through 4 along with the coda will answer these questions by focusing on a different narrative outcome of literary sliding, or Asian American "re-genreing," as an enactment of the cognitively estranging referent of radical Asian America. Asian America, as understood in Seo-Young Chu's is *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep: A*

Science-Fictional Theory of Representation, is one “non-imaginary objects” that are both a real and not real and therefore escapes traditional modes of “low intensity” realist representation. “High intensity” genres like science fiction and other “genres that [are] classified as both nonmimetic and non-SF” are, according to Chu, actually “varieties of science fiction that correspond to specific types of cognitively estranging referents” (9). Taking the lead from Chu, I analyze the abstract referent of a sliding Asian America through concrete aesthetic terms like genre, perspective, temporality, and tone, thereby making Asian America as a (non)place as accessible as possible in relational terms.

For example, chapter two taxonomizes Asian America as an intergenerational formation. The chapter reads Susan Choi’s *American Woman* to ruminate on the question: where does Asian America take place? It analyzes how the road trip undertaken by Jenny Shimada (the fictional doppelgänger of the real-life activist and cadre member Wendy Yoshimura) “re-genres” the form’s from the coming of age of white male beatniks and hippies into a story of social formation that positions loss as the structure of feeling on which an intergenerational Asian America is built. In that process of “re-genreing,” the Asian American road narrative also draws a new relation between the community and the American land, revising the land from an object of conquest (as imagined in traditional road novel) to a ground that accommodates and supports the formation of an intergenerational Asian America. The journeys of two generations of Japanese American characters’ internment and fugitivity, furthermore, throw into relief the fact that Japanese America (and Asian America more broadly) is not expressed in terms of property as the logic of settler colonization would have it (due to the racially

exclusive history and nature of the American law) but through the environmentally friendly logic of “being-with,” practiced by the cultivation of sustainability with the land and the people who have come before it.

Continuing on thinking about radical Asian America as a social formation that is at once dependent on and exceeding beyond existing systematic subjugation, Chapter 3 turns to the genre of noir fiction as exemplified in Nina Revoyr’s *Southland* (2008) and Ed Lin’s *Snakes Can’t Run* (2010) to solve the mystery of Asian-American-ness in terms of the law and justice. Both *Southland* and *Snakes* tap into the genre of noir by calling attention to the failure of law and order, and offering a counter-discourse of racial justice. That counter-discourse emerges from the investigative collaboration between Asian American protagonist, Jackie Ishida and her African-American acquaintance in *Southland*, as well as Asian American protagonist, Robert Chow and his African-American acquaintance John Vandyne in *Snakes*. The chapter uses the justice theorist Michael Sandel’s notion of fellow feeling, as well as Joan Copjec’s and Kelly Oliver’s feminist theories on noir fiction to read *Southland* and *Snakes*, all to show that both Revoyr’s and Lin’s works are challenges to the law’s definition of Asian-American-ness based on exclusion and redefinitions of it through the inclusive term of Afro-Asian partnership.

In 20th and 21st-century America, no community can be understood without considering its relation to capitalism. Chapter 4 therefore analyzes the form of Asian American documentary fiction—a hybrid genre that mixes fictional prose and documentary scripts together—as a realist mimesis of the formation of a stratified Asia

America. I read the documentary fictions as they take shape in Sam Tagatac's 1974 story "The New Anak" (1974) and more prominently in Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* (2010). The chapter analyzes these texts through Min Hyoung Song's affect theory of generosity and Timothy Bewes's theory of "reification without instantiation" to posit that excessive resources, including resources and affects, are necessary in forging an inter-ethnic Asian American legacy that goes beyond class and ethnic boundaries.

These chapters are followed by a coda, a brief speculation on the possibility of a planetary Asian America based on two pieces of science fiction related to the Sixties: Yamashita's *Siamese Twins and Mongoloids: Three Abstractions on Asian American*, a "fiction of performance" published in 2014 whose narrative begins in 1971, and Laurence Yep's "Selchy Kids" published in 1969. By juxtaposing Yamashita's and Yep's narratives—which were published a half-century apart—I argue that the sub/superhuman body remains a popular figure for Asian American science fiction writers to use to literalize the cognitively estranging concept of Asian America as a hybrid construct, and Asian American psychology and physiology as mixed. By deploying these mutant figures, Yamashita and Yep slide into science fiction elements from the ethnic narrative prototype of "root redemption journey" and the affective register of "ancestral feeling." Yamashita's five sets of Siamese twins and Yep's dolphin-sapien Deucalion (Duke) reanimate the figures of the split identity and body to signify Asian America as a sociality that exceeds the nation—one that is transnational in Yamashita's narrative, and inter-species in Yep's.

Taken together, my dissertation illustrates Asian American realism as the characteristic of Asian American historical novels, a quality that lends them commonality despite their differing forms and sliding shapes. The Asian American historical novels I study overlap in their mediation of an Asian America that is conditioned by and at once undermines the capitalist logic of reification that alienates individuals and separates literary genres from one another. If Asian American realism is transitive, capable of making changes to reality, the Asian American historical fictions below embody that realism, performing transitivity by modeling through their mixture of forms and perspectives the radical organizing principles that can reintegrate the disparate disenfranchised subjects and objects into a new sociality that is more conducive to mutual survival.

Chapter One

Family Discord/ance:

Tone and Counter-mood in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*

In terms, that is, of family, which wasn't so much an idea for [Helen], as an aesthetic. Pairs, she loved, sets, and circles.

—Gish Jen, *Typical American* (56)

How do Asian Americans identify themselves with radicalism of the past, and how to that turn that radical heritage toward the present? Looking back on the last fifty years of Asian American history, it is clear that the struggle for civil rights has been integral to the community's imagination of its position in relation to the country's larger racial politics. But from the vantage point of the rest of America, Asian American identity can seem apolitical or even conservative. The roles of Asian Americans in activist and progressive politics are often minimized, if not downright elided. In *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin argue that the marginalization of activist minorities is not uncommon in the American imagination. They point out that narratives of the civil rights movements have historically focused on the figure of the heroic black male man protesting on the street are cropped out from the frame. Their analysis focuses on African American women, but their claim about the marginalization of non-black male minorities is also salient where Asian Americans are concerned. Because Asian

Americans are hailed as the country's model minority, Asian Americans typically don't occupy a place in stories of political resistance.

The larger American culture's representational blind spot stands as an obstacle to Asian American activists who want to combat white hetero-patriarchal oppression. One tactic is to mobilize in solidarity with other minorities. For proof, one need only look at the many stories that are told on Twitter, tagged under the hashtag of #asianforblackm, and at the campaign "Letters For Black Lives" begun by the ethnographer Christina Xu, a Chinese American, who started writing letters in Chinese to explain to her parents why anti-racism is important to Asian Americans, and encouraged other Asian Americans to do the same.

The Asian American fictions I am going to read below tell the story of the activist, coalitional tradition of Asian American radicalism. Unlike Chin and others in the *Aiiiiiii* collective, the writers that I study may not have played a vocal role in the Asian American Movement. But their fictions remember, or rather, to use Morrison's word, "re-remember" a radical past for Asian America. Their accounts are mediated versions of the Sixties. Informed by temporal distance and structured by a sliding aesthetic that enables the telling of partial and peripheral stories, these historical fictions arrive at the conclusion that Asian America is by definition entangled with existing political and cultural systems. To capture its totality—including its imbrications with other activist movements and the ways it intersects with capitalism and the racism of the white-nation state—Asian American authors must slide between multiple genres, perspectives, and temporal locations.

My analysis of *Mona in the Promised Land* by Gish Jen (who was just in her early teens during the Civil Rights movement) will show that capturing the full impact that the civil rights movement on young Asian Americans of that period requires authors to engage in narrative experimentation, but that the demand of the market circumscribed the degree to which Jen's narrative could be truly avant-garde. The narrative's protagonist, Mona's eventual elopement with Seth is caused by her confrontation with Helen, Mona's mother's racist treatment of Alfred, the black chef in her family restaurant. The liberal education that Mona received in the synagogue, one that is characteristic of civil rights' racial politics, have realistic consequences on Mona: it breaks her family. To reflect that history, Gish Jen breaks the convention of the family narratives too. For Mona to articulate a new Asian American resistant subjecthood, she claims coalition with other civil rights movements like those of the Jewish and African Americans. Correspondingly, Jen successfully captures Asian American resistance's messy history of origin by oscillation; Jen slides across multiple perspective with Mona—between different identity (from a Jew to a Chinese American, from a Chinese daughter to the mother of a mixed-race daughter) and in the process, Jen models multiplicity as the aesthetic through which to re-remember the Asian American Sixties—a period full of conflicts and compromises—in its totality.

Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*

In the aftermath of the wild success of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), the family narrative has become synonymous with Asian American literature. So completely has the genre become “the master narrative” (Ninh 46) of Asian American literature that

even non-realist texts like Charles Yu's speculative fiction *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010) and Gene Luen Yang's superhero series *The Shadow Hero* (2014) are centered around the motif of the family, with second generation Asian American children journeying into the new worlds of aliens and machines only to reconnect with their family heritage in the end. Gish Jen's fiction, known for its preoccupation with the trope of the family narrative, is realist, but her satirical treatment of the family in *Typical American* (1991) and its sequel *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) renders these texts cognitively estranging for readers expecting tidy conclusions to complex family conflicts. Both novels de-familiarize Asian American family relations by satirizing the comforting, familiar, and even sentimental resolutions of intergenerational conflict that are a staple of Asian American literature.

In her first novel, *Typical American*, Jen tells the story of Ralph Chang, an international student from China who dropped out of graduate school to open a pancake house in New York. Jen's title makes the bold statement that the typical American in the late twentieth century is no longer the entrepreneurial, middle-class white man epitomized by Sinclair Lewis's *George Babbitt* or John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom*, but a Chinese immigrant who obdurately believes in the American Dream and, after much trial and tribulation, reinvents himself as an American restaurateur. Ralph also invests in his family. He marries Helen, like him an immigrant from China, and together they raise two daughters, Callie and Mona.

As is evident in the quote that serves as the epigraph of this chapter, Helen's obsession with the family is telling. She loves her family so completely that she

objectifies it, re-materializing it in terms of paired utensils and dish sets (57). Her perspective hints at the material and affective dimensions of the spectacle of domesticity that is such an integral part of contemporary American capitalist culture. As a literary trope, the family is most noticeable in posed moments like that in the epigraph, when Jen's narrator labels the family an aesthetic. In that scene, the family is made strange and restaged as an artistic value designed to give homemakers and onlookers a sense of pleasure.

The layered meanings of Helen's silverware-*cum*-family tableau indicate that the structural forces that underpin and shape contemporary American life are one of Gish Jen's central authorial concerns. In *Typical* and *Mona*, she reveals the painful limitations of the belief that anyone can be an American, and that everyone can be part of the multi-ethnic American family so long as one identifies with U.S. patriotism and practices American ideals. More specifically, in *Mona* Jen uses the conflict between Helen and Mona Chang to highlight the price paid by Asian American mothers and daughters due to mainstream American culture's idealization of the model minority family. On the surface, the mother and daughter conflict appears to be sparked by Mona's disclosure to the family restaurant's African American chef that he is not going to get the promotion in the kitchen because her parents will choose a Chinese chef over him. However, at its core, it is Helen's superficial obsession with a pristine family image that causes the intergenerational rift. Helen's fixation on that image, and her desire to hold onto it at all costs, is tested by the disobedient Mona.

But for all the ways Helen's compulsion toward familial order appears excessive,

and Mona's defiance against it fierce, the novel's publishers were content to market *Mona* as another warm Asian American family story that affirms the taste of the literary marketplace. The novel's sales figures would seem to justify that approach. Though first published in 1996, the novel remains popular today, ranking at #443 in Asian American literature, and #215 out of 300,0235 ebooks on Amazon. Upon its publication, the *Los Angeles Times* endorsed the novel as "a shining example of a multicultural message delivered with the wit and bite of art"—noting that "Gish Jen [has] create[d] a particular world where dim sum is as American as apple pie." In contradistinction to its palatable packaging, *Mona* is not just another family narrative that consolidates the status of the nuclear family as the proper alternative to the state. Instead, Jen's novel is a cautionary tale in the guise of a mother-daughter narrative that warns readers of the intimate harm done by the pursuit of a heteronormative American family aesthetic.

Jen's suspicion of this normative ideal is shown by the contradictions between *Mona*'s two endings—namely "Chapter 15: Discoveries" and "Epilogue"—one disappointing, the other "happy." Contrary to its marketing campaign, the novel's unorthodox form and content suggest that it would be better described as "metafamilial." For scholars Steven Gould Axelrod and Craig Svonkin, metafamily is the descriptor of "post-Freudian," "post-modern," "post-Victorian," "post-colonial," and "post-heteronormative" approaches to the family that critically reflect upon notions of family in order to better understand its formation and affordance. To make visible the metafamilial aesthetics in *Mona*, this chapter re-reads the novel through affect and aesthetic theories. The reading will emphasize affect's focus on interpersonal relations as circuits, and

aesthetics studies' interests in the responses that arrangements of objects and designs elicit from readers, with an eye toward how *Mona* de-naturalizes and de-idealizes the family as a concept. This analysis aims to draw attention to the possible danger of uncritically embracing the genre of the Asian American immigrant family romance by contextualizing it in the post-civil-rights political milieu as an outgrowth of cultural conservatism. Putting existing Asian American scholarship of the family in conjunction with Lauren Berlant's work on national fantasy, this chapter foregrounds how normative family stories—and in particular those of the late eighties and early nineties, from the Reagan years all the way into the Clinton era—have been co-opted by political conservatism as counter narratives that threaten to hamstring civil rights politics and undo civil rights gains by substituting the cultivation of a family aesthetic for engagement with social injustice. Family narratives that glorify the triumph of domesticity against all odds are embraced by conservatives because they are capable of promoting the agenda of diminishing the welfare state and strengthening white supremacy without appearing to do so explicitly.

In *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen's articulation of a metafamilial aesthetic is her metafictional device to prime readers to recognize the constructed-ness of the family as a conservative ideal; she does so by making palpable the aesthetic distance between the spectacle of the family and its spectators, reminding those beyond the page that their consumption of the novel is produced out of a critical engagement that observes and subverts the ideals of the normative nuclear family. The epilogue's parodic reflection of its own resolution intimates that *Mona*'s defining moment is actually the conclusion in

“Chapter 15: Discoveries” when Mona is exiled from home. That scene refuses the burden of affective labor: it is one of collateral damage, a moment of anti-cathartic disappointment that upsets Helen and Mona as much as it upsets the readers. In disappointment, *Mona* positions the readers to feel the way U.S. capitalism divides mothers and daughters by calling attention to the two characters’ distinctive attitudes toward capital accumulation and national belonging.

Ultimately, *Mona*’s scenes of domestic disruption throw into relief the ruse of U.S. capitalism that promises immigrants a sense of belonging to this country so long as they have money and good will. What fractures the Changs’ familial harmony is precisely their pursuit of these capitalistic ideals, which end up denying them the normative American good life. *Mona* delivers this message in a rhetorically heightened ending that lavishes attention on the physicality of the domestic objects that keep Helen and Mona apart—all to make readers feel the material and immaterial forces of separation issued by capitalism. This moment withholds the catharsis that readers expect from an Asian American family saga, and further fosters in them what Jonathan Flatley calls a “counter-mood” against the *dasein*—or the capitalist way of being—that induces the working class into labor, which so often gets in the way of people’s intimate relationships, like that of Helen and Mona’s mother-daughter relationship.

The Rise of the Asian American Family

Stories of the Asian American family became mainstream because they make audiences feel good about the U.S.: they reassure them that the country remains an inclusive nation where everyone has equal opportunity despite racial and cultural

differences. In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999), David Palumbo-Liu labels the Asian American family narrative the nation's text of "healing" (369). But not all Asian American literature about the family heals. According to Gish Jen's early publisher Seymour Lawrence in a 1991 *New York Times* review, only the "second generation" of Asian Americans who "are better educated" are "ready to tell the experiences" that heal (qtd. in Palumbo-Liu 411). Here, the adjective "healing" refers to the type of narrative that "is primarily concerned with the psychological adjustments of ethnic subjects and enabled by a presumption of a particularly constructed ethnic malaise" (Palumbo-Liu 396). Mother-and-daughter narratives like Jen's *Mona* and Tan's *Joy* are exemplars of healing texts, as their plot points are able to facilitate in readers a "de-politicized healing" process (396). Superficially, these texts provide an apolitical oasis to American readers who are weary of overt political conflict. Each of these novels concludes with the immigrant mother adjusting to a new liberal American culture from her feudal (in *Joy*) and communist (in *Mona*) Chinese backgrounds. Meeting them halfway are their American born daughters, who grew a new appreciation of their mothers either because of education or personal experience of discrimination and hardship.

For all of the centrality of the Asian American family in nineties multicultural literature, it's worth pointing out that the family has always been a reoccurring motif in Asian American literature, most prominently in the earlier works of Frank Chin who published a generation earlier than Tan and Jen back in the seventies and eighties. But although Chin dealt extensively with the family, his stories do not conform to Lawrence's

standard of “healing” because his portrayals of the family feature ungrateful sons and dying fathers, and are therefore less palatable to mainstream consumers in search of comforting fictions.

Lawrence’s taste for ethnic literature in the nineties is illustrative of how the right’s fetishization of the family has given rise to Asian American literature, which began to enter the literary marketplace before the millennium. The success of normative nuclear Asian American family narratives encouraged subsequent generations of Asian American writers to write toward the theme in the hope of finding a publisher—or, even better, earning more in sales. The prominence of the motif of the family in Asian American cultural productions further helps to explain why family stories are often taken by the general public as accurate ethnographic accounts of the Asian American community: the sheer number of “good,” comfortingly normative, Asian American familial representations have led the readership of U.S. fiction to believe that the racial group is fully composed of compliant subjects.

Jen’s novels tell us otherwise. Although Jen is referred to by Palumbo-Liu as a representative figure of the “healing text” genre, she is in fact quite critical of the exaggeration involved in the Asian American familial spectacle. For instance, in her review of Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), Jen calls the autobiography “outrageous.” In the *Boston Globe* (2011), she comments on Chua’s “slapdash manner” in the scene when Chua reminisces about her father calling her garbage at the dinner table and suggests that all Chinese parents humiliate their children. Critiquing that scene, Jen adds, “[I] wish that [Chua] had allowed herself more of the

tonal modulation and nuance she demanded of her girls.” In a related essay published in *The New Republic*, “Mother Superior” (2011), Jen further points out that Chua’s father—whom Chua credits for her Chinese-ness—was an ethnic Chinese who grew up in the Philippines. Based on that, Jen says that the cutthroat, goal-oriented environment that Chua cultivated in her household—which she conveniently labeled as Chinese—has little to do with China today: it, as Jen puts it, “tells us at least as much as about migration and identity, and America, as it does about China” (par. 9). By drawing out the level of exoticization involved in Chua’s best seller, Jen is exhorting readers not to take popular depictions of Asian American families at face value.

Indeed, not many readers are aware of Chua’s caveat in the postscript of *Battle*, where she confesses that “the book is supposed to be funny, partly self-parody.” But still, as Jen would agree, Chua’s “blunt and repugnant,” atonal writing style makes it difficult to tell which sections in the memoir are reflective of Chua’s real life, and which sections are her attempts at being funny. Jen’s focus on Chua’s tone in her criticisms of *Battle* reminds us that tonal variation is a key formal feature for signaling shifts in narrative meaning. Moreover, the novelist’s astute critique of Chua’s tone in her memoir indicates her own careful attention to tone in writing. In *Mona*, particularly, tone becomes Jen’s discursive outlet for satirizing the normative mother-daughter relationships that have so warped the popular understanding of the Asian American family.

So as to understand Jen’s satirical engagement with the trope of the family in *Mona*, it is imperative to see how exaggerations in mother-daughter narratives have a detrimental effect on Asian American immigrants and their children in reality; only

against such a critical backdrop does cultural conservatism's co-optation of the traditional Asian American immigrant saga become legible. To illustrate these dynamics, the following will return to Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* as the ur-text of the family narrative convention which Jen subverts in her challenge against politically conservative agenda.

In brief, *Joy* tells the stories of four Chinese immigrant women (Lindo Jong, Ying-Ying St. Clair, An-Meo Hsu, and Suyuan Woo) as well as their American-born daughters. *Joy*'s success was unparalleled in the history of Asian American literature, with Tan surprised by the wide range of audiences it reached. Allegedly, Tan received a letter from a Missourian reader thanking her for giving readers the words of *Joy* to express their feelings of alienation from their mothers (Ho 54). We were never told the race of the Missourian reader, but the attraction that many Americans found in *Joy* cries out for an understanding of its popularity that factors in and goes beyond the characters' race which may or may not invite identification from the readers and audiences.

Theorists of affect and aesthetics like Lauren Berlant of *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997) would explain that *Joy* is popular because it regurgitates a national fantasy that appeals to the general public's sensorium. In Berlant's formulation of the narrative technology of citizenship making, she surveys some pilgrimage narratives of the eighties and nineties that were written about the same time as the first wave of Asian American family narratives like *Joy* were published. These pilgrimage stories feature Americans visiting Washington, D.C. to recover their patriotism. When reading or watching "images of mass nationality" (35), as

Berlant explains, the audience is encouraged to re-acquaint themselves with the naïveté that they once had during childhood. These narratives feature incompetent characters whose lives ultimately worked out in spite of personal failings. These pilgrimage narratives, Berlant continues, function as propaganda pieces for the conservative state to broker in the American public an “infantile citizenship” (27) where innocence is prized as a patriotic quality. She adds that straight cis-gender white male characters are often replaced by “subaltern bodies and identities” (27) in narratives of national fantasy to make the mainstream white audience feel less aware of their own limitations in this country, and their status of subjugation under the nation’s socio-economic strata. “The subaltern body” in narratives of national fantasy bears a “peculiar burden of national surrogacy” that is strategically positioned to “enable many stories of minoritized citizenship to be included in the self-justifying mirror of the official national narrative while being expatriated from citizenship’s promise of quotidian practical intimacy” (36).

Asian American mother-daughter stories are a prime of example of the sort of narratives that permit “minoritized citizens” to take part in national fantasies even as they are excluded from national opportunities. The national belonging that (most) Asian American mothers and daughters eventually achieve via their conformity to normative family ideals provides a sentimental catharsis that is not unlike the sort achieved during pilgrimages to Washington, D.C. on the part of obedient citizens. Like readers of pilgrimage narratives who find a patriotic identity in their internalization of nationalist stories, readers who feel marginalized by the nation’s politics can come to find their identities as American citizens in Asian American family narratives by living vicariously

the personal trials and tribulations immigrant mothers and their daughters went through during their pursuit of the American dream. Interpersonal dramas in Asian American family stories therefore are always political. The Asian American critic erin Khuê Ninh is not mistaken when she labels the model minority as the country's "filial child" (48): the model minority family narrative promotes what Berlant calls "infantile citizenship" as it affirms the national fantasy that the faithful and the noncynical will eventually find a good life in the U.S. so long as they work hard and play by the American rules. Given the falseness of the myth of equal opportunity, its fictional derivatives—like the model minority myth—model for readers a form of infantile citizenship that is liable to lead to frustration and oppression for most Americans laboring under capitalism.

In *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (2011), Ninh demonstrates that generations of Asian American literature have produced the image of the debt-bound daughter, a figure who obtains the good life due to the sacrifices of aging, immigrant parents. The problem with sentimental portrayals of sacrificial parents and their daughter debtors is that they exaggerate daughterly mobility and compliance, along with family harmony, as they dramatize the sense of sentimentalism that the audience would expect from the genre. In the case of *Joy*, Chu notes: "Tan [makes] the Chinese mothers' generation older than they logistically need to be: because the American daughters are the children of second marriages, the mothers' childhood memories describe a China one generation earlier, and hence less touched by modernization" (qtd. in Ninh 123). What Chu suggests, and Ninh cites in "Model Minority Narratives and the Family" (2015), is that the intergenerational differences

between June and Suyuan are set up in a way that is overstated: the cultural clash that is believed to be the reason for the tension between the mother and daughter is manufactured by Tan for the audience to better position June as more indebted to her mother for having endured a trying procession of wars, famines, labors, and divorces in order to give June the best in America.

Widely accepted representations of debt-bound Asian American children like those in *Joy*, among many others, are problematic not only because they are sentimental and false, but because they normalize feelings of guilt and obligation, especially when that guilt is taught to Asian American children by immigrant parents as the virtue of filiality. What Ninh later in “Affect/Family/Filiality” (2015) terms “incrimination” is the result of such parenting: children who are deemed filial will answer the call of piety because they are taught to be attuned to the “frequencies of obligation” (50). Encouraged by their Confucian heritage and normalized by the popular circulation of conformist Asian American family narratives, Asian American children are conditioned to swallow their fear and anger, among other ugly emotions, by directing it inward toward the self. Consequently, normative nuclear Asian American stories like *Joy* have fallen prey to a cultural conservatism that co-opts the genre to perversely prize a type of emotional management that borders on masochism. In return for the immiserating containment it imposes on and fosters in Asian Americans, the U.S. nation-state rewards the community the honorary title of model citizens, which conservative U.S. media is all too happy to repeat as lip service to racial equality.

Tone in “Epilogue”

One of the harms perpetuated by the prevalence of model minority family narratives is that they have crowded out much needed alternative representations of the Asian American family. Jen’s *Mona* is one of the first Asian American family narratives to offer a complex depiction of the relationships between mothers and daughters. The novel features the titular character Mona Chang’s coming of age as a first generation American in a Chinese immigrant family, a process that turns out to be full of atypical experiences. The novel positions Mona’s maturation in relation to the stubbornly normative and assimilationist expectations of her mother, Helen. Much to Helen’s chagrin, Mona grows up in direct opposition to her wishes, becoming influenced by the values of counterculture, and turning against Helen to the point that she calls her a racist.

Under Helen’s tutelage, Callie and Mona are brought up to be obedient and dutiful. Before going to college, both daughters wait tables in the family pancake house. But their paths diverge as they mature. Callie turns into the daughter who Helen desires: the wholesome, well-adjusted second-generation child typical of Asian American mother-daughter narratives. She attends Harvard, becomes a pediatrician, and develops a newfound appreciation for everything Chinese. By the end of the novel, she also begins to go by her Chinese name, Kailan, and wears “Chinese padded jackets” and “cloth shoes” that even people in China have given up for “parkas” and “imported leather shoes” (301). Mona, on the other hand, takes up an “almost-paying-freelance job at B’nai B’rith” researching ethnic comics (298). What seals Mona’s fate as Helen’s disappointment is Mona’s pre-marital pregnancy with Seth, her Jewish boyfriend. The

order in which Mona becomes a married mother is entirely the reverse of the normative familial order Helen desires. And Helen is not the type of mother to shy away from communicating her disapproval with Mona, however passive aggressively. She does not denounce Mona outright. Instead, she uses censorious body language and silence to shame her daughter. From marching away in a huff after walking in on Mona and a half-naked Seth sleeping together in Callie's dorm, to treating Mona as if she were not there when she returns home to tell her that Alfred has dropped his lawsuit against the family restaurant, to abstaining from visiting Mona right after Io was born, Helen's poses and gestures of refusal suggest she is so upset by Mona that she may have given up on her.

The novel's dichotomization of Callie and Mona as extreme opposites, coupled with its characterization of Helen as a stickler for normative habits, are our first clues that Helen and Mona's reunion in the section titled "Epilogue" conforms too neatly to the stereotypical Asian American family narrative to be taken at face value. More evidence lies in the narrator's sarcastic storytelling style which renders the happy feelings in the epilogue as superficial as the wedding that it describes. In this section, a heart-felt marriage plot is staged to purge the bad feelings that have accumulated in the readers' sensorium up to this point, yet multiple times in the epilogue, the narrator forthrightly tells the readers that they should not take this wedding spectacle too seriously. At one point, she says, "such a production, this wedding, for a non-production!" (298). The wedding is "non-production" because it is legally perfunctory: Mona has already "sort of married Seth" to obtain a tax reduction from the "federal government" (296). The couple is "going to be more married" for "major medical" insurance coverage (298). The

narrator's honesty here is brazen, and her tone ironic. Given Jen's clear attention to tone's role in mother-daughter narratives, a finer focus of the narrator's tone in the epilogue, which veers slightly off course from the sort of ending expected from the convention of a marriage plot, will unveil an unconventional reading of *Mona* as a work of metafamily fiction that critiques heteronormativity's hold on Asian American literature and locates the mainstream American readership's idealization of the model minority family as the source of this stasis.

Sianne Ngai's work on tone helps to explain how Jen's satirical tone operates in the narrative's alternative endings. In *Ugly Feelings* (2007), Ngai talks about tone in the context of Herman Melville's last fiction *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), a book that is known and widely deplored for its flat and uninviting tone. Ngai's analysis focuses on the "unfeltness" (68) in *The Confidence-Man*, arguing that the flatness is an intended irritation staged by Melville to reflect and comment on the way feelings are codified, reproduced, and circulated in the capitalist market even as they can't be felt subjectively. *Mona*'s epilogue uses an equally grating, but quite different, tone to achieve a similar codifying effect. The tone is melodramatic rather than flat, inflated with emotions to the point that it renders the story too cheesy, too gimmicky to be taken seriously. Tone is a hard term to define—some critics (e.g., Susanne Langer and Mikel Dufrenne) take it as a feeling inherent in an art piece, while others (e.g., I. A. Richards) consider tone as a "stance," or "a speaker's 'attitude to his listener'" (41). For, Ngai, tone offers a signal of a text's situated-ness in a matrix of societal strata. In her words, tone is "a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or 'set toward' its audience and world"; it

is “the formal aspect that enables affective values to become significant with regard to how each critic understands the work as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations” (43). In exemplifying this term, Ngai gestures toward Asian American literature. She references Anne A. Cheng’s observation on the melancholy of race that permeates a host of Asian American texts that are “suffused” with the “melancholia” that “points back to long histories of systematic racism in U.S. culture and national policy” (43). The tone in *Mona*’s epilogue, however, is not melancholic but melodramatic. If melodrama is the readerly expectation of Asian American family narrative, then the narration’s exuberant performance of that melodrama is a sign of excess that Jen deploys to index the narrative as a product emerging out of the formula which the literary marketplace has imposed on Asian American writers.

Ostensibly, the novel’s epilogue conforms to the conventions of the family narrative. It offers a happy ending: Mona and Helen are reunited in California; Mona’s daughter, Io, claps at the sight of her mother and grandmother’s embrace. But upon close examination, it becomes clear that the suspenseful buildup to the long-delayed mother-daughter reunion is part of the novel’s sendup of the family narrative. This suspenseful buildup is decorated with sentimental cultural references that seem to wink at the inevitability of a happy ending and the sentimentality of the cathartic discharge that marks the ending of every good family saga. Though readers are eventually rewarded with a kind of intergenerational reunion and closure, the process of the build-up is shot through with hyperbolic, ironic sentimentality. Consider this example of how the narrator jarringly comments on family in a way that undercuts the motion toward closure:

[Mona] imagines her mother, still soft-skinned, writing to her family, year after year, only one day—family!—to get a reply, and the news that her parents were dead. This has happened since Mona’s break with her mother. Mona put a yellow ribbon in her hair, just like Callie, as a sign of mourning. She wrote her mother a note. But of course, it is now she who writes, and does not hear back, and wonders. (300)

Here, the grating interjection of “—family!—” is supposed to be read as a rhetorical ornamentation of the hypothetical surprise that will come one day, when Helen’s estranged family from China writes back. The word *family*—weirdly bracketed by a pair of dashes—is syntactically redundant, and in fact, disrupts the grammar of the sentence. Even more telling is the way that it is accentuated by the exclamation point. The overflowing of sentimentalism gushing out from the isolated one-word phrase distorts the rhythm of both the passage and the family saga itself, in turn piquing the readers’ awareness of the sentimentalism that has enveloped the Changs from the first page. In Ngai’s words, the excess that surrounds the word and the concept of the family is a “peculiar redundancy” that circulates “fake feelings” (51), and ends up in a “momentary disconnection” (85). Allegorized by this moment of short circuiting is the aesthetic experience of reading a family story. The narrator’s affective surplus can be understood as Jen’s strategy to clandestinely distance readers from their expectation for a standard reading experience. The insincerity of the epilogue’s happy ending to come is foreshadowed by the narrator as she goes on to deliver in a solemn manner Mona’s preemptive ritual of wearing a yellow ribbon to mourn her mother who may or not may be dead. The yellow ribbon is an important ironic symbol here: commonly, it is a token that people tie around oak trees in support of military troops. It also stands as a symbol of hope used to arouse optimism during dire situations like searches for missing children

and anti-suicide campaigns. Mona's ludicrous appropriation of the yellow ribbon as a sign of concern for her estranged mother adds a layer of irony to the narration when the epilogue is supposed to be genuine and heartfelt.

As the narrator sends up the sentimentalism typical in a family saga, she performs to expectations and then goes beyond them. She lulls the readers into believing her pretense by staging several plot points that are the signature of the genre. She accentuates the sibling rivalry between the prodigal daughter, Mona, and her older sister, Callie, by keying in on the guilt Callie tries to foster in Mona: "You did what you wanted; someone had to pick up the pieces. And it would have killed Mom if we'd both been like you. It might kill her yet" (302). The narrator's quotation of Callie is only one of her techniques to heighten the tension in anticipation of Helen's appearance: as the narrator goes on wondering, "is that right, that Mona might be the death of her mother? Mona has heard all about Helen's heart problems; it hasn't sounded so very bad. Still she worries" (302).

The tone of sentimentality obtains all the way to the moment of Helen's reappearance in the epilogue. The narrator compares Mona's initial sighting of Helen to the spotting of an insect: "a certain four-legged creature now creepy-crawling up the oleander-lined walk" (303). In this way, the narrative uses ironic—even mocking—language to compare Helen to a bug while at the same time invoking the figure of the specter, which carries powerful symbolism in Chinese-American narratives. Insects, according to Chinese superstition, are often seen as reincarnations of deceased parents, relatives, and friends visiting the living. Here, the narrator invokes that superstition to make readers wonder if Helen is dead. Mona's vision of the insect eventually morphs into

a vision of her parents as the figure draws near: “Half of the creature she recognizes: That’s her father in his wing-tip shoes. He is carrying an airline tote bag, and a folding umbrella, even though there’s a drought on. As for the other half, she recognizes that too” (303). The coyness of the narrator’s tone in the passage gives rise to the suspense that readers would normally find in a family saga. The terse and strange description of Helen starves the readers of emotional comfort; the readers are only going to be made aware of their emotional need by the character Io at the end.

The last page of the epilogue presents a mother-daughter reunion gone queer. The embrace between Mona and Helen is compared by the narrator to the moment when the bride and groom exchange vows: “for the way [Mona’s] crying, anyone would think that Helen is the person Mona’s taking in sickness or in health...Until death do us part, [Mona] thinks, and rushes forward, just as Io falls down” (304). Though a peripheral character, Mona’s daughter Io functions as the Barthesian punctum in the scene—her witness of the mother-daughter romance makes overt the novel’s teasing of the readerly expectation for a resolution. Io’s gaze serves as a parallel to that of the spectator, framing the scene as a “wedding within wedding,” which calls up the artificiality of the happy ending that functions so formulaically in Asian American family narratives.

According to the narrator, after falling, “[Io] stands right back up on her own two feet, and like a fine little witness, claps” (304). Her clapping is yet another metafictional element of the epilogue: with sound effects—Io cues the ending of the melodrama, pointing to, and thereby metafictionally undermining, the catharsis expected in a

normative family narrative. Io's clapping can be understood as what Ngai describes as an "unintended crackle" (79).

Ngai, in her explanation of the way tone can sometimes unintentionally operate like an "orderly disorder," (81) focuses on a rock show scene from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), where a guitarist's output feeds back into the audio system, and becomes an input, resulting in a crackling sound amplified. When drawing parallels between this scene from film and other moments in novels, Ngai makes the case that affective redundancies in novels, like the guitarist's audio excesses in an audio track, can create interference. Quoting Brian Masumi, Ngai writes that "redundancy of resonation" plays up "disconnection" (79). Audio surplus disconnects because the crackling "indicates something about the state of the channel through which the signal is transmitted, even as it begins to interfere with the signal itself" (79). For *Mona*, Io's clapping can be understood as a type of audio surplus like the crackling sound described above: its excessiveness takes attention away from the mother-daughter embrace at the center stage as Io cues the reader's emotional response to it. Io's redundancy is Jen's means of communicating something to the readers about *Mona*'s "situated-ness" (80) in a genre overdetermined by the mainstream literary marketplace's appetite for good feelings.

Taken together, the epilogue of *Mona* stages "a semblance of feeling that nonetheless dissolves into static" (81): the tone of the narration is sentimentalized explicitly, and so constantly and ironically exuberant in the use of images of familial separation and unification that it leaves readers feeling none of the usual emotions of

catharsis. The epilogue's status outside the narrative further testifies to its metafictional role in commenting on and subverting the wholesome normative family aesthetic. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines epilogue as an address delivered by a performer to the audience after a performance—a hint that renders the epilogue inorganic as a conclusion. If the epilogue is indeed a perfunctory closing in which Jen performs a parody of the mainstream reading public's consuming habits, then where exactly is *Mona*'s proper resolution?

Counter-Mood in “Chapter 15: Discoveries

Undeniably, “Epilogue” is a kind of ending, but one devoid of the realism about family that obtains in much of *Mona*. More real, in contrast, is the wrenching tableau of separation between Helen and Mona in “Chapter 15: Discoveries.” That chapter is a more logical conclusion of the novel because, in addition to falling within the narrative proper, the mother-daughter fallout fits with the trajectory of the novel that is progressively steering away from happiness to unhappiness. The tone of the chapter is far from cathartic: it withholds the good feelings that many readers have anticipated since picking up the novel. This withholding becomes more obvious as the novel unfolds, following an affective course that shifts from the vivacious buoyancy as presented by the novel's playful cover, on which a Chinese girl's pair of eyes peek out from the hollow of a bagel placed on top of a bowl of noodle soup, to the severe intergenerational conflict that roils its ending. The affect theorist Jonathan Flatley (2012) would call this shift the cultivation of a “counter-mood,” or “a method to master a mood” (503).

According to Jonathan Flatley in “How A Revolutionary Counter-Mood Is Made,” mood is what Martin Heidegger refers to as “Stimmung” (503), which Flatley translates as “attunement” (504). Flatley says, “only within a mood, by way of mood, we can counter things in the world as mattering to us” (503). Zeroing in on *DRUM* (1968), an African American newspaper out of Detroit, which reported racist instances of black laborers being exploited by their white bosses during the civil rights movement, Flatley argues that the paper functioned as an agitational tool that the publishers, who were themselves of the working class, mobilized and circulated around black laborers to catalyze protests. In another article about mood published five years later, “Reading for Mood” (2017), Flatley notes that literary fiction nowadays can function as an agitational tool that changes the American reading public’s mood, too. The example Flatley refers to is Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), an experimental text centering on descriptions of close encounters between an African-American “you” and a host of other people, ranging from the chair of “your” English Department, to white friends who deploy micro-aggressions, to Starbucks customers. For Flatley, *Citizen* is like *DRUM*, a text that has resonated with the mood of many readers subjugated under the white capitalist and hetero-patriarchal order. The mood in *Citizen* is constituted in Rankine’s words by how we “fail each other and ourselves” in manners “disappointing, excoriating,” and “unbearable” (qtd. in Flatley 152). By describing unbearable situations caused by racism (rather than hurling anti-racist exhortations or instructions at readers), Rankine’s work, as Flatley puts it, “awakens” “a counter-mood” to the “collective she addresses” (152). Flatley does not specify what the counter-mood does here, but in his

conclusion he shifts gear to Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), a mixed-genre piece of queer theory and autobiography, a text that Flatley says "helps readers shift their mood, in part by showing us how queer theory helps the author inhabit a new mood" by "finding" "a new way of being-with" the world (152). Flatley's point at the end seems to be that a counter-mood can be transformative, operating to shift readers' perceptions of their relations with larger social matrix.

Seen from Flatley's perspective, *Mona*, too, is an agitational tool whose concluding motion culminates in a counter-mood. *Mona* is told from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator addressing a hypothetical audience. The narrator, like that in *Citizen*, portrays the way white capitalism fails interpersonal relations. Though white capitalism is not overtly visible in the scene of Helen and Mona's separation, its subtle presence is articulated by the many household items that pull the mother and daughter apart, and the affective contour of Helen's disappointment and Mona's guilt.

The epilogue does little to dispel the heavy counter-mood created by the fallout between Helen and Mona in chapter 15. And if we read that scene as the narrative's authentic conclusion, it becomes clearer that *Mona* is attempting to shift the reader's mood, to awaken in them a revolutionary counter-mood against capitalism—a force that, if it goes untheorized in Asian Americans' private's sphere, will continue to do more violence to intimate lives. If "a white supremacist social order" (152) is that which gives "shape and rhythm" (152) to the micro-aggressions between "you" and others in *Citizen*, that same order—with a distinctive economic inflection—is that which intensifies and escalates Mona and Helen's intergenerational conflict. By telling the story of Helen and

Mona, a narrative of intimate harm that readers know all too well, especially when stuck in the throes of arguments with their own parents, Jen's work arouses a counter-mood in readers (particularly Asian American ones), asking them (be they children or parents) to find new ways of "being-with" each other. In the search for what that new outlook of familial co-inhabitation would be like, *Mona* reveals that the first step is to recognize how all Asians in this country (despite how intimate they are) are stratified by capitalism.

Before turning to a close reading of "Chapter 15: Discoveries," it's necessary to consider one more piece of criticism that helps to illuminate how Jen comments on white supremacist capitalism in *Mona in the Promised Land*. In "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness" (2001), Susan Koshy examines cases when Asian immigrants have been stratified by and become complicit in whiteness (qua U.S. capitalism). Two scenarios that Koshy mentions are of relevance to our discussion: they include the ways "restaurants in small and large Asian capitals often deploy the discourse of ethnic and family *loyalty* (emphasis mine) to enforce discipline and extract compliance" (163); and how Chinese Americans in Mississippi participated in anti-black racism in the hopes of shortening their "relative distance" to whiteness (157) during Segregation. These two points illuminate white capitalism's metamorphoses, the ways it can pit Asian Americans against other races, and create conflict between Asian Americans—like Helen and Mona—who have very different ideas of equal rights.

The cause of Helen and Mona's conflict can be traced all the way back to "Chapter 10: Camp Gugelstein," which presents as a temporary color-blind oasis the French mansion of Mona's Jewish friend, Barbara Gugelstein. When Mr. and Mrs.

Gugelstein are away, Barbara, invites Mona over; Mona is then joined by Seth, her boyfriend; Alfred, the black chef in the pancake house; and Evie, Barbara's cousin from Minneapolis. In the Gugelstein's mansion, the group experiments with the hippie lifestyle that rose to prominence during the late sixties: they do yoga, participate in group chanting, and practice free love. Evie, a photographer, takes pictures of "the gang having good old times" and of herself lying in bed with Alfred (215). But problems emerge when Evie leaves New York and forgets about the pictures she took and left behind in the drawer of the Gugelsteins' mansion. When Barbara's parents return to the mansion, they find all of the pictures, including the intimate ones between Evie and Alfred. Scandalized by the racy photos of her niece posing with Alfred, Mrs. Gugelstein says—in a terrifying nod to the legacy of lynching as punishment for African American "crimes" against whiteness—that she is so upset that "she could hang every one of them" (215).

Mona and Helen's relationship goes awry because of this incident, too. Helen, who was so worried about the scandal Alfred could bring to the pancake house because of his involvement with Evie, fires him as a precaution. Mona is enraged by Helen's decision and confronts her, to which Helen responds,

How do you think we feel? Our cook act like that? And that girl, she is white, you understand? Barbara's mother called; of course we have to do something. What happens if I see Barbara's mother on the street? Am I going to say hello, how are you, that Alfred still work for us as if nothing happened? You know what kind of insult that is to Barbara's mother? It is as if I stand there in front of Daitch Shopwell and slap her in front of everybody. Our cook make that kind of big trouble, and we say hello, how are you, we do nothing? (220)

In this ugly monologue, Helen concedes that she fired Alfred out of concern for the pancake house's reputation and for the pristine image that she wants to maintain in the

minds of her white customers in the neighborhood.

Finding that reason ridiculous, Mona interjects “but aren’t there laws [... and] that’s so racist” (220-21). Mona’s grievances so aggravate Helen that she launches into a lecture on national identity and filial loyalty in an attempt to remind Mona of her own sacrifices and to fill her with guilt:

You are American girl. Only an American girl can do something like that. Only an American girl would think about her mother killing herself and say oh, that’s so racist. A Chinese girl would think whether she should kill herself too. Because that is how much she thinks about her poor mother who worked so hard and suffered so much. She wants to do everything to make the mother happy. (221)

Helen’s lecture defines American identity against Chinese identity—with the former synonymous with being activist and ungrateful, and the latter apolitical and obedient. Obedience, as we find out later in the chapter, means daughterly servitude above all. In Helen’s view, Mona, as a Chinese daughter, is not a free “person” (221) but an intimate laborer with the designated “job” responsibilities of “listen[ing]” and “not tell[ing] [her] mother big-shot-opinion” (221).

The aforementioned scene, furthermore, recalls the narrator’s earlier passing comment which jokingly compares Mona and Callie to “slave labor” who provide “handy on-call restaurant service” (26). But the capitalist compliance breezily sent up in that passage seems far darker when set against the racist injustices that obedience is plainly meant to ignore. As this scene shows, Chinese American daughters are managed not only financially but also affectively, guilt-tripped by their mothers when they are not contributing to the solvency of their families. At one point, “Callie and Mona” as daughter-laborers

tried to unionize and go on strike, but instead of becoming folk heroes, they turned into Disappointments [...] The Disappointments [would] come home to find their mother in her bathrobe; and then they felt about ready to put on their bathrobes too. For her *mood* [emphasis mine] had turned into their *mood*, it was like a forest fire jumping a ditch. (26-7)

The mood shared by Helen with her daughters by way of imposition is what Flatley would call a “bad mood” (518). “Bad moods,” as he defines them are “ones in which *dasein* becomes blind to itself,” moments “when we are shut off from an awareness of our thrones and the ‘with-ness’ of our being” (518). Bad moods, as Flatley continues—this time citing French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy—are “also ways of being with others, ones in which, not being able to say ‘we’ is what pledges every ‘I,’ whether individual or collective, into the insanity where he cannot say ‘I’ either” (518). Beholden by the affective reach of Helen’s bad mood, there is no “I” for Mona and Callie. Helen’s subjectivity is generalized as the Changs’ collectivity, and Helen manages her monopoly in the collectivity via affect, which functions like an apparatus that curbs any of Mona’s and Callie’s revolutionary intentions. Guilt, which Helen has drilled into her daughters’ sensorium through discipline, is meant to curb Mona’s disobedience. Mona and Callie are attuned to their mother’s mood as a result: in the fear of turning into their mother’s emotional liability, Mona and Callie self-regulate (i.e. de-escalate work strikes), suppressing their own discontentment, because they know: once they feel, think, act defiantly, Helen will confiscate their happiness by treating them as “disappointments.”

The word “disappointment” is worth mulling over because it tells as much about Mona as about Helen. Lauren Berlant’s work on the discourse of disappointment in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*

(2008) suggests that female disappointment is “the desire for and a cost of feminine conventionality” (xii). If that is the case, Mona turns into Helen’s disappointment because Helen wants to be part of a feminine order, one of the immigrant women that the critic Julia H. Lee (2016) calls “model maternity.” Being a part of that order requires the production of successful daughters. The next generation’s success is what grants the model mother her worth. When seen from this perspective, Helen and Mona’s intergenerational conflict is partly caused by Mona’s leak to Alfred about her parents’ preference for a Chinese cook over a black cook in their new restaurant’s kitchen, and partly by Helen’s political desire to be recognized as a worthy citizen. Hostile as Helen is to anti-hegemonic activism, she is political: her desire to become a model mother makes her deeply conservative. Aspiring as she does to be a model immigrant mother, Helen harbors what Berlant (1997) calls a national fantasy which “fuses [her] private fortune with that of the nation”; the fantasy promises her that if she “invest[s] in [her] work and family-making, the nation will secure the broader social and economic conditions in which [her] labor can gain value and [her] life can be lived with dignity” (4). Mona’s and Callie’s achievement and her pancake house’s reputation are chips in Helen’s negotiation with the U.S. capitalist nation-state, with which she hopes to bargain validation for her compliant citizenship.

To preserve her national fantasy and defend her reputation, Helen eventually kicks the defiant Mona out of the house. This move is sparked by Mona’s challenging of Helen, which all began with Mona professing: “This is America. I can be what I want, I can—” (248). Without even the chance to finish her sentence, Mona is slapped by Helen

on her cheek. The last thing that Helen says to Mona is “In this house, children listen to parents” (250); “You want to be something else, you leave this house, don’t come back” (249). Mona takes the bait and finds herself on the train to her sister’s dorm in Harvard the next morning. Mona’s mixed feeling of freedom and guilt in the train station is an indication of the impossibility for a daughter to be guilt-free in a capitalist matriarchal order. To survive in the face of Helen’s controlling, conservative, “bad mood,” Mona must take the radical path of running away from home.

Despite the conflicts above, the end of “Chapter 15: Discoveries” seems to move toward a kind of catharsis. This moment toys with readers’ expectations of the topoi of the family narrative. At the end of the chapter, Mona returns home from Boston and pounds on the front door, yelling into the house: “We talked to Alfred! He’s going to drop the suit!!” (294). In response to the long anticipated news that Alfred is no longer suing the family for racial discrimination, Helen is startlingly despondent: she slowly makes her way from the bedroom to examine the commotion. Realizing her presence may not have registered for Helen visually, because Helen doesn’t have her glasses on, Mona made herself known again, verbally this time: “It’s me, Mona!” (294) But, as the narrator describes: Mona’s voice does not seem to have penetrated into the house—because the “absorbent plush” of “the carpet [on] the stairs seems to have muted her words” (294). And even when Helen speaks, it is obvious that she intentionally tunes out Mona’s voice, and avoids the sight of her presence. She asks, “Who is this? Is this my daughter?” (294)—a question that is not so much looking for Mona’s affirmation but wondering why Mona—who eloped with her boyfriend and betrayed her father’s business—would have

the audacity to appear before her. With another question, Helen makes clear her severed tie with Mona: “What are *you* talking about, talked to Alfred? And who is this *we*?” (295). The distinction between “we”—meaning kin—and “you”—non-kin—lingers in the silence that follows. The “we-you” differentiation simultaneously speaks to the physical demarcation of the “inside and outside” of the family—with Helen inside, Mona outside the doorstep, standing there uninvited, not recognized as kin. The chapter—and the narrative as a whole (minus the epilogue)—ends with the narrator articulating the lingering silence:

Helen returns to her bedroom; and this time she doesn't even close the door, she doesn't have to. For it's as if this is what she's seen with her glasses off, operating on inner sight—that this disturbance can be trusted to leave by herself. Finally she's big enough not to need to be told. (295)

The lavish descriptions of the separation between Mona and Helen by their house's doors, walls, carpets, decorum, and proprieties are, in Flatley's words, attuning the readers to feel the material and immaterial forces of capitalism that have severed the daughter from the mother. As suggested by the affect theory cited above—especially Berlant's work on disappointment and Ninh's work on guilt—the mother's and daughter's ugly feelings that arise at the end of the narrative emerge from the same source: heteropatriarchy. Helen's disappointment in Mona is the emotional price she pays for her normative desire for the “model maternal” status; while Mona's lingering guilt is a result of the way this familial fantasy has suffused her consciousness. In their own ways, both women have internalized the patriarchal, racist, and capitalist structures that govern the Chang's small business. The successes and failures of the business therefore become personal successes and failures. By situating Helen's and Mona's affective

implication in capitalism, *Mona* makes palpable all of Asian Americans' "thrown-ness" in the system (Flatley 518). Helen and Mona's relationship is collateral damage under the "promised land" that the immigrant Chang family has bought into.

Conclusion

Sans "Epilogue," *Mona in the Promised Land* is an agitational text; it ignites in readers a subversively powerful counter-mood. By drawing readers' awareness to capitalism's infiltration into Asian Americans' private sphere, the novel encourages Asian American readers to re-organize intergenerational relations in ways that will bypass the manipulation and exploitation of capitalism. *Mona* is therefore not just another family narrative. Instead, as this chapter shows, *Mona* is a work of metafamily fiction with two endings—one anti-cathartic and the other subversive and insincere. This chapter's focus on tone and counter-mood in *Mona* reveals the tonal tight rope that the novel walks, sometimes conforming to, at other times contesting, conventions of family writing in Asian American literature. The turbulent and painful trajectory of Helen and Mona's relationship shows the perils of complicity with dominant modes of domesticity and political economy, and the difficulty of challenging those relations.

This chapter's attention to *Mona*'s aesthetic and affective elements furthermore points to the familial alterity that Gish Jen leaves with readers, an alterity that cautions parents and children that they both have the responsibility to imagine and practice family-making in a way that resists capitalism's over-determination of interpersonal bonds. Jen's mother-daughter saga models such contestation of capitalism as it challenges a hegemony-consolidating closure. *Mona*'s defiance of the trope of good endings

ultimately makes the political statement that negative affects are sometime necessary for the achievement of social good. The necessity of negative affects in radical politics will be further discussed in the next chapter. The breaking and making of Jim and Jenny Shimada's intergenerational relation in Susan Choi's *American Woman* shows that the feeling of loss offers Asian Americans of different ages and cultural background an affective portal to be with each other. In conveying that story, Choi—like Jen—calls upon a popular genre—but this time one that is not usually associated with Asian American literature. Through the narrative framework of the road novel, Choi tells of Jenny and Jim's memories of and visits to places that are imbued with histories of lost (including that of the internment and a terrorist attack). In the process, Choi slides into the narrative tropes from the internment narrative and immigrant family romance among others that are characteristic of Japanese American literature—all to convey the multiplicity in the surrounding environment and the roots of Asian America's foundation in the Long Sixties.

Chapter Two

Gendered Detours: Vehicular Mobility and Community Mobilization in Japanese American Women's Road Narratives of the Long Sixties

“He and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there” (138).

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

“Mobility means something very different for Yankee men and for women and minorities” (165).

Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “The Politics of Mobility”

In Mona and Helen Chang's case, mother and daughter grow apart because the daughter is gradually assimilated into a leftist system that prefers the de-centralization of power from the patriarchal center, which the mother unfortunately helps uphold. The intergenerational estrangement between Jenny and Jim Shimada in *American Woman*, the central text of this chapter, is slightly different. Similar to Mona, Jenny grows apart from Jim because she is radicalized by left politics; but unlike Mona, Jenny flees from her patriarchal order at home only to participate in another one, a radical terrorist group organized by her boyfriend, William.

It is only when William is imprisoned, and his friend takes control of the group and enlists Jenny to support the Symbionese Liberation Army that Jenny realizes her feeling of being trapped has, actually, everything to do with her lack of purpose in life. Her purpose, so far, has been determined by the patriarchal system and paternal figures. Change occurs when Jenny goes on a road trip and she begins to find herself in exile.

The road, the object imagined by the traditional road narrative as that which is to be conquered, becomes a space for Jenny to experiment with her sexuality (with Pauline) and also to come to greater awareness of her body's agency and limitations. It is only by being on the road, having survived the scrutiny and violence on the highways and motels as a fugitive, that Jenny comes up with the radical praxis of "being-with," which brings her closer to her father and, more surprisingly, to nature.

When conveying this complicated coming-of-age story, Choi re-genres the road fiction, sliding in and out of its conventions, and mixing it with other narrative registers to undo the hetero-patriarchal history and ideology of the genre. To show that, this chapter illustrates how *American Woman* "talks back" to and draws on the road narratives that have come before it, ultimately revising the genre from one that is about the white male ego's expansion through territorial conquest and sexual predation into one that is about Asian America's sociality's growth as it branches out of the nuclear family into a larger sociality. The Asian American social formation—as it is expressed in Jenny's story—is predicated upon the principle of "being-with," carried out by the praxis of mutual survival with those who have come before (as suggested by Jenny's decision to join with her father in participating in the first Day of Remembrance in Manzanar) and the land (as indicated by Jenny's choice to become an environmental activist, live in a commune, and make a living by squeezing juice out of the stems and roots of vegetables).

The Affect of Vehicular Mobility

How does the vehicular movement of Japanese internees' descendants throw into relief the history of racial dispossession and displacement in this country? And how do

the routes they travel map out an Asian American collective? To answer these questions, this chapter analyzes the ways the Asian American filmmaker Renee Tajima-Peña and the novelist Susan Choi mobilize the road narrative, that classic form of Sixties counterculture, to depict the complexities of Asian American experience during that period and offer a radical re-imagination of the Asian American community in resistance against its incorporation by the US nation-state into the corps of willing subjects. Tajima-Peña's documentary *My America...or Honk if You Love Buddha* (1997) and Susan Choi's novel *American Woman* (2003) show a cast of "bad Asians" who angrily protest American imperialism's disenfranchisement of brown and black peoples, and take guerilla action against military recruitment centers in retaliation for the American army's operation in Vietnam. The road blocks and rest stops these defiant characters run into, in a sense, visualize for the reader and audience the "possibilities" and "prospections" of Asian mobility on the US land in the post-internment era (129 Sau-ling Wong).

"On the road," the movements of the Japanese American terrorist Jenny Shimada in Choi's *American Woman*, and the protagonist/director Tajima-Peña in *My America*, have little in common with the carefree travels of the white, male protagonists depicted in the classic road narratives of the counterculture. For instance, Jenny actively takes a round-about, cross-country route during her fugitive life in order to avoid the FBI, while the civilian Tajima-Peña is called off the road by a patrol sheriff in rural Washington for a trunk inspection (figure 1). These diversions disrupt the linearity and seamlessness of Shimada's and Tajima-Peña's road trips and draw out a path of circuitry. Demarcated by the circumference of Shimada's and Tajima-Peña's journeys is the collective of Asian

Americans within, who are all, in some way, grieving lives and causes lost to imperial patriarchal powers.

Reflecting the non-linearity of Shimada's and Tajima-Peña's itinerary is the a-chronological order of the narrative time in *American Woman* and *My America*: the here and now in these texts is constantly interrupted by the protagonists' reflection upon the past, a motion that undercuts the triumphant multiculturalism celebrated by the present in *My America*. The result of this non-linear and a-chronological progression in *American Woman* and *My America* is the emergence of a negative affective register, one that affect theorist Heather Love would describe as "backward." Love links what she calls the feeling of backwardness with "shame, depression, and regret" (4) among other negative affects that resist the modern injunction "to be get better" by forgetting and forgiving. As Shimada and Tajima-Peña travel across the country, they incorporate the remembrance of the past into their journeys and find that it contributes to personal flourishing. Yet for both women, an inarticulable sense of loss remains, refracting their personal disenfranchisement in this country as part and parcel of racial injury inflicted by imperialism. Their road trips, which were intended as "root redemption" journeys, are ultimately more complex—less neatly redemptive—healing processes. Jenny's and Tajima- Peña's peregrinations bring them into contact with a network of other Asian Americans who are hurting from or still haunted by the experiences of dispossession, displacement, assimilation, and alienation, among other "backwards" affects.

As such, I argue that *American Woman* and *My America* position the condition of collective loss as "the social origin" of Asian Americans' "emotional lives" (Flatley 3).

Shimada's and Tajima-Peña's experiences on the road show that for Asian Americans (and perhaps all minorities), claiming America as home is a fundamentally historical and emotional undertaking: a task that involves what the affect theorist Kaja Silverman calls the recovery of the "negative oedipal mother" (16).⁶ In this recovery, one grieves and loves in refusal against the foreclosure of the informative past that shapes who we are. Collective grieving of the loss of the negative mother—meaning the phallic mother (per Lacan and Silverman), and also the home culture and heritage (per Frantz Fanon)—is fundamental in the formation of what Tajima-Peña calls "My America," a terrain of filiative and affiliative networks.

Affect theorists from Eve Sedgwick (1993), to José Esteban Muñoz (1999), to Heather Love (2007), to Jonathan Flatley (2008), have proven negative affect's political efficacy in counter-insurgency. Flatley's formulation of "melancholizing" (which he later terms "affective mapping") is of particular interest to this chapter.⁷ For Flatley, "affective mapping" is a "particular set of aesthetic strategies that allow one to perceive the historicity of one's affective experience" (105). Flatley's studies of minority authorship and readership reveal that affective mapping can identify and assemble a

⁶The negative oedipal complex precedes the positive oedipal complex, in which the mother is perceived by the daughter as phallus, serving both as her love object and object of identification until her surrounding environment summons her to replace the mother's position with that of the father's. According to Silverman, having access to this history of desire is crucial to the development of female sexuality because it can better facilitate a woman's redemption of her desire amidst the patriarchal order's continual displacement of it.

⁷Different from Freud's pathologizing formulation of melancholia, Flatley defines "melancholize" as a knowledge production process, a practice that "what one does [when] longing for lost love, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires and lingering on events from the past" (2).

network of revolutionaries who “share losses and are subject to the same forces” (3). For this chapter’s analytical purpose, Flatley’s methodology of “affective mapping” is of particular interests because the formulation’s cartographic impulse coheres nicely with Sau-Ling Wong’s praxis of “map-making”—a tracking of America’s “histories of geographies and geographies of history” (3); furthermore, it augments Wong’s focus on the physical terrain with that of affect.⁸ With a twin focus on both the affective and physical movements in Shimada’s and Tajima-Peña’s journeys, my analysis re-interprets the road narratives of Japanese American women whose ancestors survived the internment as aesthetic and affective meditations on community mobilization.

In their interviews and autobiographical scholarship, Tajima-Peña and Choi demonstrate their awareness of the political stakes in art. In her article “No Mo Po Mo and Other Tales of the Road” Tajima-Peña makes explicit how she sees the making of documentary films as part of her activism, for when the film maker ventures out from the high tower of the studio to the community, she exposes problems the public seeks to elide, and trains the wisdom of her community upon them. Choi, on the other hand, is more concerned with offering a corrective account of Asian American activism that is historically grounded in coalitional politics between what was called the Third World and racial minorities in the 1960s and 70s. When asked in her interview with Lynn Andriani about *American Woman*, “what do you see as the biggest difference between the antiwar

⁸ Affect, according to theorists like Sedgwick, Love, and Flatley (the cohort whose work is enabled by Silvan Tomkins’s scholarship) refers to a system’s sensorium as produced by and imposed upon individuals. More specifically, in his “Modernism and Melancholia,” Flatley clarifies affect as a “quota of energy,” a quantifiable ‘intensity’ that by nature seeks release” (53).

movements of the 1970s and today?” Choi says that in the 70s, “to be an idealist was a moral thing” and now “idealism is almost impossible,” given how complex the word has become.

Tajima-Peña’s and Choi’s political efforts complicate their road narratives; their art shows that their politics are in dialog with, yet distinct from, each other’s. To better understand the intricacy between and betwixt vehicular mobility and community mobilization in these road narratives, I review feminist and Asian American scholarship on the politics of movement to illustrate the different socio-economic implications of the directionality, mission, and consequence of minorities’ mobility vis-à-vis those of white, cis, heterosexual, men. Set against that backcloth is an extended mapping of the peripatetic movements of Shimada and Tajima-Peña on their cross-country road trips. This mapping reveals the aesthetic compositions and political connotations of their journeys’ backward affective registers and horizontal geographical vectors. This mapping seeks to complicate Lisa Lowe’s conceptualization of Asian America as a terrain of heterogeneity by offering up what I call “singular plurality,” an Asian American formation that affectively links the multiplicity of our community in a collective commemoration of loss and seeks to achieve a more sustainable and ethical co-existence between individuals and the world.

By appropriating and transforming road narratives, Choi and Tajima-Peña ultimately alter the status of Asian Americans in the counterculture from that of object to subject. As road narratives, *My America* and *American Woman* empty out the white settler colonial sentiment in the genre. In its Asian American, female-centric form, the

road narrative details community mobilization rather than national expansion. This narrative reconfiguration, additionally, radicalizes the motif of mobility in the Asian American cultural imagination, shifting it from a sign of the socio-economic achievement (as in the model minority myth) to one that gestures toward a truly liberated Asian America.

The Gendered and Racialized Logic of the Road

Feminist scholars of the road narrative have long argued that traveling across the American continent is not as freeing an experience for sexual and racial minorities as it is for their white heterosexual male counterparts, because mobility in this country is always already racialized white and gendered male by US history. What Sau-ling Wong has identified as the “sexual symbolism of the American landscape” (120) was used to justify white settler colonialism—the “Manifest Destiny” of western conquest. This process is apparent in such famous works from that period as John Gast’s painting entitled *American Progress* (1872). In it, modern-looking white men in their hats and boots are riding horses, carriages and trains across the continent on the ground, following the direction of a female angel. Gast’s visual make explicit the gendered and racialized logic of the American narrative of mobility in which westward expansion is white men’s response to the call of the female angel.

As the meaning of the road changed across the centuries, it remained circumscribed by patriarchal logic. A radical shift in the American cultural imaginary of the road took place in post-World War II America. In the 19th and 20th century, the road was seen as the path toward an American modernism engineered by the protestant work

ethic of cultivation and reproduction (Lye 119). But in the aftermath of WWII, beginning with the Beat Generation, “hitting the road” became a reaction against dominant American values.

This shift is exemplified by Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Its protagonists Sal, Dean and Carlo embody the opposites of Protestantism: they are all bohemians, but their refusal of cultural norms is not confined to a specific neighborhood or city. Instead, they use the road to escape from and contest mainstream culture. For the Beats, the road serves an alternative avenue for maturation that does not involve settling down. This becomes obvious in Sal’s epiphany of his growth when he wakes up one afternoon under a reddening sun on the plains somewhere in Nebraska and Iowa. He professes, “I was just somebody else, and some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was half way across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future” (17). Here, the road functions to symbolically initiate Sal into the country, mapping his coming-of-age onto the unfolding of landscape from the East to West. Westward movement integrated Sal and his friends into the country as national subjects. Rather than cultivating the land, the Beats travel back and forth across it. This new way of claiming America represents the changing industry and demographics of the country, from agrarian to industrial, static to locomotive, monolithic to multicultural. According to Ann Brigham, post-war travelers’ encounters with “strangers,” created “associative bonds in them” that expanded their sense of personal scale from the regional to the national (24).

But the Beats also show us that the residue of the pioneers' racism and sexism remains. A troubling aspect of *On the Road* is its portrayal of women as objects, subject to the male gaze in their derivation of voyeuristic pleasure. The narrative's point of view shows as much: in a segment where the narrator describes the three travelers' encounter with a "middle-aged colored woman" in a cafeteria in Chicago, the narrator follows Dean's eye's attention at the woman's "flipping butt" which Dean desires to "follow down the street" and take "to the ole Cadillac in the alley" (240). However, like an excited child, Dean is quickly distracted by the sight of another woman up in a window "looking down with her big breasts hanging from her night gown, big wide eyes" (240). And when women are not commodified by the Beats' curious male gaze as a pleasing spectacle, they are objectified as part of nature: this sexist sentiment is apparent in the advice on women that Dean offered to Sal. Dean told Sal to hold onto a girl if she is "real great," and to "*cultivate her and make her mind his soul*" (187 *emphasis mine*).

As for Sal, rather than seeing women as blank slates that do not have any substance of their own, minorities—sexual and racial included—are of great value because their distinctive qualities enrich his dull, white heterosexual life. In the first section of *On the Road*, Sal encounters Terry, a Hispanic girl on the bus from SF to LA, whom she refers to as the "cutest little Mexican girl" and then follows her home to Bakersfield and finds the temporary job of cotton picking with Terry's lead. Later, in section three, Sal makes an appropriative comment about how much he "wishes he were a Negro, a Denver Mexican, and even a poor overworked Jap" because he feels that the "white world had offered not enough ecstasy for [him]" (181).

This brief survey of *On the Road* only covers a few of its many “gender-linked assumptions” (Wong 126). Still, acknowledging the prevalence of these gendered attitudes of casual entitlement within the narratives of the counterculture is a crucial part of the project of imagining a more inclusive America. Frontier romances and road narratives play a significant role in “bildungsroman” of mainstream American culture (Ganser, Campbell, Primeau and Lackery). And, for all of the mobility narratives’ problematic history, the traveling hero’s quest for self and home links up neatly with the widespread American ritual of the “rite-of- passage”—which make the genre an appealing space for writers in the social peripheries to meditate on marginalized lives’ possibilities and their relation to US society. Still, an important question remains: given the sexist and racist realities of the road, and the troubling symbolism invested in the American landscape by settler colonialism, is it possible for minority subjects to re-claim the mobility genre and motif to create American “bildungsromans” of their own?

Ann Brigham argues that the minoritarian reclamation of the road narrative is possible. In *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film*, Brigham asserts that patriarchal dominance does not entirely preclude racial and sexual minorities from traveling the American land, though it may limit their mobility. This limitation creates in minoritarian travelers very different relationships with country. For instance, in African American journalist John A. Williams’ 1965 memoir *This Is My Country Too*, the author’s trans-American trip in a shiny new car charts out a different relation between the car and the traveler—one in which the car shifts from a conduit of boundlessness to a vessel that signifies bounded-ness. Williams comes to see himself as

an American citizen in the struggle for a more perfect union as he witnesses the conviviality of democracy on the road, seeing different drivers of color assembling at Washington DC for a protest. If the Beats' sense of entitlement to the country widens as they incorporate different cultures, peoples and into their sense of scale, then travelers of color like William come to see themselves as part of the nation in their co-presence with other bounded individuals.

For William, the road is a place to test out for himself which parts of the country are more accepting of people of color than others, while for women drivers, the road throws into relief women's un-freedom in public where the domesticity that their female body signifies always marks them as out-of-place.

Though there are cultural productions made by female artists that show the empowerment vehicles can grant women—for example, Beverly Donofrio's 1992 memoir, *Riding in Cars with Boys: Confessions of a Bad Girl Who Makes Good*—other works highlight the awkward partnership between the car and women drivers, a link that calls attention to the patriarchal force the road holds over the female body. For example, in the classic movie *Thelma and Louise*, the FBI's ceaseless pursuit of the female fugitives, according to Brigham, suggests that the road is far from liberating, and, in fact, stifling to women so long as the female body is politicized (150). The FBI agents relentlessly pursue the pair because of the public displays of their bodies (drinking and dancing) is such an affront; as such, "hitting the road" for Thelma and Louise is not an escape that promises self-renewals, but rather a kind of restlessness in response to the

inescapable hegemonic grip that defies women's "transcendence of the scale of the female body" (151) and confines the female body to that of the domicile.

Brigham's analysis shows that women artists and artists of color are well aware of the racial and sexual prejudice on the road. Their portrayals of vehicular mobility are full of minorities' feelings of un-freedom, reflecting the reality that the road engages women and people of color intensively with everyday racism and sexism. Navigating through and around the intersection of oppressions has then become a signature motif in road narratives penned by minority writers. Furthermore, capitalizing on the genre's attention to geography, minority writers, like the Asian American ones I will discuss below, appropriate it as a unique platform to meditate on the contradiction between their ostensible freedom and their feeling of un-freedom on the American land, a contradiction that leads to depictions of distinctive American realities.

In one of the first race-based systematic analyses of minorities' mobility (1993), Sau-Ling Wong asserts that the motif of mobility continues to be a vehicle through which Asian writers in the US and Canada express their ability and inability to claim Northern America home. Wong suggests that given Asian American writers' awareness of Asian American immigrant's history of mobility—which often comes in the inflected form of immobility and coerced mobility—their protagonists in mobility narratives often follow a different direction and bear a different mission than their white counterparts. To differentiate the diverging vectors and motives of Asian Americans mobility from that of the white, Wong labels white mobility "extravagant," connoting "opportunity for individual actualization and or societal renewal" (141); as for Asian American mobility,

“necessitous” implying the “impossibility of fulfillment for self or community” embedded in the movement.

In Wong’s view, movement—be it necessitous or extravagant—is directionally inflicted: extravagance follows the horizontal vector, while necessity the vertical. Wong characterizes the vertical movement in Asian American literature as flee, flight, or fall. For instance, in Shawn Wong’s *Homebase*, the protagonist Rainford becomes a taxi driver to escape the memory of his forefathers but only keeps running into passengers who remind him of them; in Janice Mirikitani’s narrative poem “Suicide Note,” a nameless straight-A student plunges down to the ground floor of her dormitory, leaving behind a note of complaint about having to shoulder her parents’ American dreams; in Fae Myenne Ng’s “A Red Sweater,” the third daughter takes flight from home by becoming a Pan Am stewardess. These manifestations of vertical mobility—though variegated—unanimously gesture at the American homeland’s in-hospitality toward Asian Americans, whose immigrant parents pass onto them the stress of making ends meet while enduring the country’s legal exclusions and continuous estrangement. Even in the rare occasion that necessitous mobility moves along the x axis, it is by no means a promise of the type of permanent settlement that the white pioneer finds in westward expansion. To illustrate that, Wong draws on Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is In The Heart*, the first road narratives in Asian American literature. It features a semi-autobiographical protagonist who arrives in Los Angeles during the Great Depression and begins searching for a job. The expansive list of cities and states that he traversed in the search of a homestead—from Seattle to Portland to San Francisco to Fresno to Riverside to San

Bernardino to Nevada and finally New Mexico—belies the short and superficial engagements that the protagonist had in each place, a superficiality that the author uses to express the social alienation that Filipino immigrants feel when interacting with Americans.

When thinking about how Asian American literature presents Asian immigrants' settlements in the US, Wong argues that Asian Americans have a better chance to claim America home by non-capitalist, artistic and relational, means. Wong makes this case by surveying literary works that de-couple the causal relations between happiness and wealth, wealth and work. In her reading of Bienvenido Santos's *What the Hell for You Left Your Heart in San Francisco*, she focuses on protagonist David, a new Filipino immigrant in SF. Every day, David descends from his temporary home in the glamorous neighborhood of Diamond Heights, and takes note of the unfortunate lives of immigrants, including that of an "old men waiting to die long, long away from home" and "brown boys and girls cursing their parents, spitting at their own image." Drawing on these moments in Bienvenido Santos's narrative, Wong says that the author puts forth the argument that though wealth grants immigrants materialistic satisfaction, it can't bestow into them the sense that the US is home. Likewise, in her analysis of Murayama's *All I Asking For Is My Body*, Wong homes in on the character Kiyō who won a fortune out of a craps game, which bought his family out of debt, to remind us that financial solvency can be a result of hard work, but it can also be achieved through pure luck.

Work and the wealth it generates are not the keys for Asian Americans to obtain horizontal mobility, the type of movement that connotes comfort; instead, as Wong

specifies, it takes something non-monetary to expand Asian Americans' sense of belonging to the US: and that being the building of "human community" (156). Wong develops this claim through a close reading of David Wong Louie's short story "Displacement." The story's protagonists, Mr. and Mrs. Chow, are a Chinese couple who behave austere toward each other. Together, they have determined early on in their marriage that they won't have children. But after Mrs. Chow's immigration from China to the US, especially after having gone through several house-hunting sessions that made her feel in a real way that home is receding both from sight and memory, she now decides to behave more "womanly toward Mr. Chow" (156), and began to come to terms with a domestic role in life. Wong argues that Mrs. Chow's sudden acceptance of a domesticated womanhood is the sort of compromise that Asian Americans have often undertaken in the process of claiming America home; in addition to buying a house, she needs "stable, lateral network[s] of human relationships" to feel grounded (164).

"Displacement" is an outlier in Wong's studies because it resists her paradigm's prediction that Asian American mobility has to be either flight, fall, or flee. Mrs. Chow in "Displacement" is not an escapist: she eventually settles in America and expands her personal network, which, in Wong's vocabulary, is making the extravagance of homesteading a Chinese American necessity for the continuity of survival. The horizontal vector of Wong Louie's short story here points to the possibility of an Asian American horizontal movement towards individual/communal actualization.

By reframing Wong's concept of horizontal movement from a white extravagance to an Asian American necessity, I intend to read the road narratives of the Japanese

American female travelers Jenny Shimada and *Renee Tajima-Peña* as exemplars of a process of Asian American community mobilization. The motif of mobility in Japanese American literature has historically been used to make racial grievances in protest against the US nation-state's mass incarceration of the approximately 120000 people of Japanese ancestry following President Franklin D. Roosevelt's signing of Executive Order 9066, two months after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Internment narratives, for example, Yoshiko Uchida's *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family* (1982) and *Miné Okubo's Citizen 13660* (1946), recall the imaginary of Japanese American's coerced mobility in the telling of the community's story of being transported by locomotives across the Sierras and Southwestern deserts to faraway camps. Mobility in Japanese American literature, therefore, is typically associated with the un-doing of home, other than home-founding.

As they remobilize the motif of mobility in their narratives of community building, Choi and Tajima-Peña make conscious reference the Japanese American history of displacement. In *My America* and *American Women*, the road is a space for Shimada and Tajima-Peña to freely travel and dislodge the memory of immobility which burdened their ancestors; yet, at the same time, the women travelers are still constrained and contained by the racism and sexism of the road. The road, therefore, does not lead them to a utopic sense of America, but bears them along a cycle of historical acknowledgment where the past is brought to bear on the present as they move forward in search of a future more just.

Renee Tajima-Peña's *My America...or Honk If You Love Buddha*

As a documentary, *My America* is part autobiography, part ethnography. In the film, Tajima-Peña uses her crisis of identity to foreground a larger question of crucial importance to everyone in her community: do Asian Americans belong to this country? In search of an answer, Tajima-Peña hits the road. Her journey takes her along the coasts, through the Midwest, the North and deep South, but all her questing, and the multitude of responses she receives from the Asian Americans she meets along the way, complicates rather than closes off her inquiry. For instance, a Filipina family whose New Orleans roots date back to the 18th century through the Manila Galleon trade identify as Americans first, Southerners second (figure 2), while a Hmong family recently arrived in Minneapolis from Laos finds it hard to identify with Americans. Pan Ku Yeong, the mother of the family, confesses to the camera that she feels alienated in Minnesota, because, there, she is constantly mistaken as Chinese, and harassed frequently in the public by epithets like “go home, chinee” (figure 3).

The heterogeneity of the Asian American experience persuades Tajima-Peña to believe that Asian America is not constituted through any particular geographical terrain, but rather, through a web of relationships Asian Americans hold with the nation, its people, and the land. Tajima-Peña's record of her journey enables her audience to follow her physical and emotional labor in suturing that Asian America, which she represents as a collective voice from Asian peoples across generational, ethnic, and state lines. Through the documentary, Tajima-Peña encapsulates the metonymic relation that ties the Asian American collective over in both sound and sight. For instance, at the end of the

documentary, during her own home-coming scene, Tajima-Peña travels down the memory lane with footage of her childhood in Chicago. Layered on top of the visual is her voiceover, professing the new perspective gained from the road, “next time when people ask where I come from, I would say I was born in Chicago, raised in Asian America. I realize that the question is not about how people become real Americans, but how America becomes its people” (figure 4). Suggested by this scene is the “interlacing” (Jean Luc-Nancy 5) of filial and affiliative networks that pull together the constellation of Asian Americans. As shown in the documentary, this network is comprised of Asian American lives with which Tajima-Peña identifies. Stories about these lives move Tajima-Peña to a new relation with the nation: they ground her as part of a collective “being” that is Asian America, which takes roots on the US land. As an auto-ethnographic documentary that records this process, *My America* revises the road narrative genre into a community-making journey that reconciles the heterogeneity of Asian Americans and reclaims “co-existence” (Luc-Nancy 61) as Asian America’s origin.

A key element of Tajima-Peña’s community mobilizing narrative is her identification of Asian American’s common origin as one of loss, a sense of incompleteness caused by a spectrum of Asian American experiences ranging from separation from one’s own home country, the violence of racism, and the lack of a mutual point of departure. Tajima-Peña’s journey in pursuit of Asian America is therefore as much a physical search as it is an emotional one. In fact, Tajima-Peña horizontal movement across the US: from Los Angeles, to San Francisco, to New York, to New Orleans, to Florida, to Chicago, to

Duluth, to Seattle, and then back to Southern California (figure 5) embodies a “backward” (Love) affective pull. This affective motion draws together a group of Asian Americans who would be considered “backward” by the US nation-state due to their refusal to let go of their losses, which stand in the way of their assimilation into the productive prototype that is expected of Asian Americans by the myth of the “model minority.”⁹ Furthermore, her search for Asian America is a counter narrative to the “model minority” myth because spending time on the road is “extravagant” (Wong) and also because her interviews roll the past back onto the present, instead of looking forward into the future.

My America’s “backward” temporal and affective pull is obvious from the start of the documentary, when Tajima-Peña recounts her grandfather’s immigration history to the US from Japan in the early 20th century. Mr. Tajima first arrived in San Francisco in 1905. Upon disembarking from his ship, he was chased after by a group of white people who threatened him with stones and shouted at him “Go Home, Chink!” In the fear of being assaulted, Mr. Tajima fled to Los Angeles. Serendipitously, his flight from racism turned out to be fortuitous; it saved him from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake that killed 3000 people and destroyed 80 percent of the city. This anecdote shows Asian American mobility in a positive light, associating it with survival rather than defeatism.

⁹As detailed in chapter 1, the concept of the model minority is a social construct that stereotypes all Asian immigrants—despite disparate ethnic and socio-economic differences within the group—as higher achievers in the US. The myth attributes Asian Americans’ success to their quiet nature and puts them on the pedestal as symbols of America’s post-racial future.

On the road, Tajima-Peña's car moves forward, but the narrative's temporality moves back. On the representational level, the documentarian creates this backward temporal movement by interjecting historical audio and visuals into the narrative's diegetic present. For instance, after the footage of her grandfather, the narrative re-focuses back onto the present, with Tajima-Peña saying, "whenever people yell the same crap at me that they did at my grandfather 'go home, Chink,' I wonder, 'what do they mean? Chicago?'" Tajima-Peña ends this reflection by concluding that "no matter how you slice it, it comes down to one question, will we truly belong to this country." With that, Tajima-Peña turns to her red station wagon and ventures out to the open road (figure 6). As she departs, the camera zooms out to show the landscape widening, a move that integrates Tajima-Peña into a homogenous national experience marked by America's geographical width and cultural depth.

As she continues, a shot from the camera positioned in the car shows Tajima-Peña crisscrossing between lanes next to cargo trucks, waving at motorcycle gangs. Her swift and smooth transition on the road seems to suggest that Tajima-Peña has already become part of America. But she soon distances herself from this fantasy and pokes fun at it in the following sequence: there, Tajima-Peña says "nowadays, we [Asian Americans] seem to be everywhere, but if you listen to the sound of it, it seems like we are some sort of alien-nation." The corresponding montage shows the many Asian faces populating the streets of American. Shots within the montage include big groups of Chinese tourists de-coaching at Griffith Park; busy Asian pedestrians in Manhattan; and hijab-wearing women strolling in an anonymous suburban neighborhood (figure 7). Super-imposed

upon this montage are some overtly racist comments made by callers to radio shows: first, a man saying “this country should not accept anymore of those people/ after they arrive, they bring over their family/ we have already got enough of them on welfare”; second an African American woman asserts, with righteous indignation, “I went to high school with Orientals/they are arrogant and prejudiced people/ and they show their color to black people”; and lastly a man yelling at the radio show host after he is corrected not to call Japanese people Japs: “why is it rude to call Japanese people Japs; is it because you have a Japanese girlfriend; who are you to say it is offensive?” The juxtaposition of these shots with talk-radio hate speech speaks to the fact that the increasing number of Asians in this country is not accompanied by increased acceptance among many white Americans. Indeed, the familiarity of this racism renders the Asian bodies on the screen out of place and out of time. The voices that accompany the shots contain them, marking their bodies as anomalous with decade and even century old stereotypes.

These moments of stark racial animus jolt the audience out of the feelings of comfort that contemporary America’s uncritical celebration of multiculturalism can easily impart. To expose the continuity of the racist past with the present, Tajima-Peña’s uses humor to place the routines of a present-day Chinese immigrant in dialog with xenophobic, eugenicist stereotypes from the early 20th century. The immigrant Tajima-Peña follows holds four jobs: a seafood retailer, fortune cooker producer, tai kwon do teacher, and a security guard. The film tracks the man throughout his busy routine: he begins his day at the fish market, then moves to a tai kwon do practice court, after that, to a street event where he offers security supervision, and finally his fortune cookie factory.

It is only inside this factory that the restless camera stops for the first time in the whole day. The camera zooms in on the man's fortune cookie machine oozing out flour onto the molds in his assembly line. An audio clip extracted from an old science lecture plays over the shot. In the clip, a male announcer is reading off from a scientific paper that state Asians are born with the DNA to postpone sexual gratification. Here, Tajima- Peña pokes fun at the archetype of the good Chinese neoliberal subject, cracking a joke about the immigrant's hardworking virtue as dated eugenic studies would. Tajima-Peña's intention with the scene is to link the racist past's seemingly obsolete stereotypes with the racism that still obtains today. By incorporating the turntable's fuzzy sounds that interfere with the science lecture, Tajima-Peña brings the antiquated past back to the present, all to ridicule the prominent ideology of colorblindness as naïve and insidious, foreclosing as it does any discussion of racism by treating the topic as outdated. The scene is of a piece with the documentary's thoroughgoing commitment to linking moments of racism in the present with racism in the past. By reminding viewers of a moment when xenophobia was inflamed by science, Tajima-Peña renders the racist past as something that can be heard and felt today; her persistence, therefore, is to remind the audience of the unfinished business of airing racial grievances.

In addition to audio, Tajima-Peña deploys flashback to excavate chapters of recent history that the US nation-state has sought to bury in obscurity. In the segment filmed in Arkansas, Tajima-Peña featured the famous activist couple Bill and Yuri Kochiyama. With them, Tajima-Peña revisits the Jerome War Relocation Center, where Yuri was interned as a girl. Upon their arrival at where the Center should be, Tajima-

Peña is surprised to find no trace of the camp. And it is only after Yuri talks to the farmer on a truck at where the camp used to be that she discovers they are already standing on the original site of the camp.

Since there are no visual remnants of this “buried town,” Tajima-Peña inserts old footage from a black and white clip titled *Build Model Town For Interned Japs* (figure 8). In a jolly tone, the announcer of the clip says, “a Japanese model town is where the Japanese lead an unmolested life/ pay to work/ with bathtub and all daily necessitates. Despite the war, they still find Uncle Sam a loyal master.” Though not produced as a mockery itself, *My America*’s flashback to the footage comes across as a joke in the face of history because of its denial of mistreatment of Japanese American as prisoners of war. In this scene, Tajima-Peña solicits the audience’s laughter and makes strange the US nation-state’s sanitizing strategy of separating itself from the historical reality of the race-based incarceration, poking fun at American imperialism’s “incognizance” of its impossibly “tone deaf” attitude towards the internment.

Undeniably, much racial progress has been made since the internment; but, as indicated in *My America* (a documentary made during the Clinton era) many Asian Americans are still made to feel like unwelcome aliens in this country. By compiling Asian Americans’ disparate stories of love and loss, past and present, into a documentary of the community, Tajima-Peña, in a sense, is creating a historiographic record of Asian America that transcends time and space, focalizing on loss as a common ground experience to Asian Americans across generations.

For instance, in the segment about Chicago, Tajima-Peña's hometown, she recalls two vows that she swore in life: 1) "to stand up against the attitude that confronted her grandfather at America's door"; and 2) to "never turn into her old American parents." By forthrightly engaging with her Asian-American identity, Tajima-Peña is reacting against the culture she was raised in. Her father was originally drafted to fight the Nazis, but then failed to prove his American patriotism on the World War II battlefield because his unit caught small pox and ended up being quarantined as a whole until the conclusion of the war. Her mother spent part of her youth imprisoned just for being Japanese. Due to these reasons, coupled with the traditional Japanese belief that "the nail that sticks up has to be pounded down," Tajima-Peña was brought up to act "all-American." Her journey is therefore partially motivated by a desire to re-new her relationship with the nation by expanding her sense of American-ness. What comes out of the trip, however, is something else: the realization that feelings of alienation and ancestral loss connect her to other Asian Americans, enlarging her interpersonal basis in this country.

In marked contrast to white male travel experiences, where encounters with women and people of color serve as opportunities to pursue sexual penetration and cultural conquest, Tajima-Peña's interactions with strangers are encounters that the French theorist Jean Luc-Nancy would describe as contacts that "make sense of one another" (5 *Being Singular Plural*). The resonances Tajima-Peña finds between her own experiences and those of the people who she comes into contact with enable her to look back at her own life from a different perspective. This is true of those who grew up under a different culture (like Victor Wong in SF Chinatown) and those who came from wholly

different generations (like the Kochiyamas). In “melancholizing” with Victor over his loss of son (Tiger), and the Kochiyamas over their loss of son (Billy), Tajima-Peña is not exhausted, as Freudian logic might suggest. Instead, her identification with a series of similar but different painful causes offers her a conduit to process the loss of her brother and the complex American ethos as parts of a larger racial narrative. Tajima-Peña’s different strands of loss begin to come into a kind of focus as she drives North from Mississippi where Bill Kochiyama frequented during the Freedom Rides. During that trip, Tajima-Peña also stopped at the head stone of the African American Civil Rights activist James Chaney; that tribute makes her wonder what can she do for her activist forbearers in return for their contributions.

The sight of the Chicago skyline upon her return home reminds Tajima-Peña of her first experience of racism at a young age, an experience that catalyzed her commitment to confront racism and publicize it. The incident took place after she interviewed her grandparents about their internment experience for a school project. To her surprise, when she shared the project with her classmates, the teacher accused her of lying, saying that shameful practices like the interment could never happen in a great country like the US. Tajima-Peña tells us that ever since the teacher’s allegation, she has understood “that her life is defined by racism.”

After moving to California as a teen, Tajima-Peña participated in the Civil Rights Movement, joining protests that clamored for racial and class equity, a process that shaped her conviction that protest is the most American of expressions, because it helps to purchase inclusion. As Tajima-Peña tells this coming-of-age story, a visual album

unfolds onscreen, replete with pictures of her yelling and holding signs during a street protest. Midway through the tale, the camera stops and lingers on a specific picture, zooming in until Victor Wong is visible in the background, holding a camera, taking pictures of the protest. In her commentary on this uncanny moment, Tajima-Peña says, “little did I know, Victor Wong was with me in this process all along” (figure 9).

In the diegetic present, the camera then cuts to Victor Wong speaking about his participation in the Civil Rights Movement as a journalist. This encounter between Wong and Tajima-Peña positions the Civil Rights Movement as a key point of racial coalition and the moment that birthed Asian American identity. Like their shared history the film unveils, Victor and Tajima-Peña’s post-Civil-Rights experiences also dovetailed: they each lost a beloved family member. In the documentary, Tajima-Peña stages a pair of commemorations for these losses—one for Victor’s son Tiger, the other of her brother Billy. This sequence commences with old footage of Victor cuddling a young Tiger; and then cut to another shot of Tiger as he grew older, playing guitar with Victor (figure 10). In the audio background Victor murmurs: “the Chinese don’t believe in heaven; we believe that after people die, their ghosts and spirits live with us. I imagine I am surrounded by my grandfathers and great grandfather. And I imagine Tiger is telling them how to live.” Tajima-Peña’s scene of mourning follows Victor’s musing on the possibility of reunification in the after-life. As with the previous, the tone of the scene is far from depressive. What differs here is Tajima-Peña’s treatment of the past. Rather than flashing back to treasured moments, Tajima-Peña shows a quiet scene of an empty street from an angle inside her station wagon. That quiet street is actually the present location

where her brother Bobby was killed in a hit and run automobile accident (figure 11). In the film, Tajima-Peña calls attention to the manner in which her family mourns Bobby's death, terming it "not very Asian."

There is no shrine to Bobby. Instead, Tajima-Renee's mother has preserved Bobby's Grateful Dead t-shirt collection. More importantly, the year after his death, the parents testified in court to the American government's mistreatment of Japanese Americans through the internment process to "make sure what happened to them won't happen to other people." "Melancholizing" over the past to the extreme extent of preserving property of the deceased in pristine condition clearly made a tremendous impact on the life of Tajima-Peña's mother, for it prompted her to attest to the government's past atrocities, an act of courage she avoided in the past out of fear. The segment on Tajima-Peña's mother shows that personal grief can be mobilized into political grievance in court. Like the documentarian's early experience with racism, this transfiguration from grief to grievance, can be understood as a force that motivated Tajima-Peña's making of *My America*. Having experienced loss and alienation herself, Tajima-Peña's films the documentary to testify to the ways the nation's racist past continues to infect its present, and to demand that nation offer more acceptance and respect for the past and present of Asian Americans.

Tajima-Peña's unique relation with the road informs her alternative story about it. The documentary is very aware of Kerouac's tradition and is working with and against

it.¹⁰ In doing this Tajima-Peña mourns, on the one hand, the exclusion of Asian Americans from the American countercultural tradition, and, on the other, American imperialism's displacement of Japanese Americans. By constantly reminding the audience about the past, and ending on a scene that looks backward to her own familial past in Chicago, in a genre that typically ends with a turn towards new horizons, Tajima-Peña calls attention to the lost lives, objects and costs that the nation-state attempts to erase and forget in the name of assimilating and incorporating the Asian Americans into the country's melting pot.

As the prototype of Asian American road narrative, *My America* opens up temporal and psychic dimensions in road narratives that usually center on bodily and vehicular movement. Or rather, what Tajima-Peña exposes for us is the spectacle of negative affect—feelings of displacement, alienation, and melancholia—that throws the body into the foreground, dramatizing the destabilizing affect of grief through circuitous vehicular motion. Loss in Japanese American road narratives is configured as a car that turns backward and a driver who feels “backward”—together they form an affective force that rolls the present back to the past, and use the affective space made available by the loss of the present to make new meaning about the past. The space of individual and group invention that Tajima-Peña excavate from collective loss is synecdochic of Asian Americans' broader inheritance of loss, or what Min Hyung Song calls the “lost

¹⁰Victor Wong mentioned Jack Kerouac in an early segment where he describes himself as a beatnik, and recalls the proximity between SF Chinatown and the studios where the Beats Movement took place. Wong remembers Kerouac fondly, saying that the author made a character out of him in *Big Sur*.

manuscript” (59) which has the potential to stimulate reparative creativity; it does so by inviting Asian Americans to craft new stories of origin. The novel that I am analyzing below, namely Susan Choi’s *American Woman*, is another example of this sort of reinvention.

Susan Choi’s *American Woman*

Jenny Shimada’s travels in the novel *American Woman* share a number of similarities with the personal journey of Tajima-Peña as documented in *My America*. Like Tajima- Peña’s, Jenny’s journey takes her across the continent, from California to Japan, to New York, and back to California by way of Indiana, Missouri, Wyoming, and Nevada (289). In another link with Tajima-Peña’s journey, Shimada’s travels serve to mobilize communities, including a female-only gun defense group and a pan-Asian protest group that agitates for a reduction in Jenny’s jail time for her part in a murdering plot. Transitory as these groups are, they make a lasting imprint on Jenny’s thinking about what makes an effective community whose members feel equal and nourished.

If *My American* illustrates the genre of Japanese American women’s road narrative is in dialogue with the theme of community mobilizing, *American Woman* is focused on the ethics that surround the formation and constitution of such communities. In the remainder of this chapter, I will illustrate this claim by tracing how Choi, like *Tajima-Peña*, uses the motif of mobility to comment on social movements, and capitalizes on the trope of the road narrative to propose the making of alternative relations between the nation and the racial minorities it has displaced. I will begin by contextualizing *American Woman* in relation to Choi’s political views, with the aim of

establishing that the road narrative serves as cautionary tale told against what Choi has labeled “idealism.” Then I will consider the corrective Choi offers to this “idealism” by charting out the rhizomatic network at work in the novel, which establishes the “singular plurality” in *American Woman*.

During an interview in which she discussed her inspiration for the design of Jenny Shimada, Susan Choi admitted that the character is modeled after the real-life fugitive Wendy Yoshimura in the Patty Hearst case that took place in the mid 1970s. Choi finds Wendy of particular interest because of her peripheral role in the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). In comparison to other young and more hot-headed members in the cadre, Choi points out that Wendy’s speech to court was more “judicious,” and her actions more “circumscribed.” However, Choi did not set out to write a biography of Wendy Yoshimura, because she wanted *American Woman* to be a novel that is different from “tabloid narratives.” Choi’s authorial intention is evident in *American Women*. Focusing on Wendy’s racially and economically marginalized perspectives enabled Choi to reflect upon the political idealism that SLA embodies. As Choi notes in the interview, the biggest difference between the long 1960s and today is that “idealism is a problematic position to hold now.” Looking back at the period with forty years of critical distance, it is possible to see that Choi offers an evaluation of the efficacy and limitations of the political idealism that flourished during the Sixties and Seventies, especially within anti-war groups.

The idealism Choi interrogates in *American Woman* arises out of convergence between foreign policies and moral values. Since the end of WWII, the US has taken

pride in being the moral compass of the world; American political idealism—and American exceptionalism—emphasize America’s longstanding commitment to democracy and personal liberty. But in the Sixties, Civil Rights protests and the Vietnam War revealed the unevenness of the nation-state’s commitment to freedom, and its failures to live up to its claims to moral superiority. These failures—along with U.S. democracy’s imbrication with capitalism—created space in the national discourse for new forms of idealism. Activists working to further these ideals often relied on non-violent tactics. But other groups—in particular, radical groups on the left like the SLA—deployed violence. In *American Woman*, Choi is concerned with the idealism of the American nation-state and the radical cadres that opposed it. In Choi’s view, radical idealism is equally dangerous as international idealism because of its absolutism, its violence, and its willingness to resort to coercive indoctrination.

In *American Woman*, Jenny’s involvement with the anti-war movement is portrayed as a detour in her life, one that separates her from her father, and subjects her to fugitivity and imprisonment. But the novel suggests that the Anti-War Movement is not inherently misguided; it becomes misleading after it is dominated by the patriarchy, a point Choi establishes by positioning two men as the leaders of the terrorist group that Jenny is a part of: the “People’s Army,” a stand-in for the SLA. The orders issued by these leaders, William and Frazer, put Jenny’s life at risk. She is first assigned to plant a bomb in an army recruitment center, and then to offer shelter for three fugitives so that they can finish writing a memoir for Frazer to sell. During her time at the group, Jenny loses sight of who she is, floundering in the face of the expectations imposed upon her by

her body size, race and gender. Due to her petite physique and Asian face, Shimada, at different points of her fugitivity, other characters tokenize her as the spokesperson for all Asian suffering. This experience influences Jenny in the long run, for after she withdraws from the People's Army, she struggles even harder to find herself a space of belonging in this country.

But Jenny is not broken by this violence. In flight from law enforcement, she travels across the continent with Pauline (stand-in for Patty Hearst). With Pauline, Jenny slowly develops a same-sex intimacy. Her bond with Pauline affords her a precarious sympathy with whiteness, one that verges on cross-identification. In identifying with Pauline, whiteness—a property that Jenny has long taken as synonymous with American-ness—is de-idealized. This de-idealization, in turn, shifts how Jenny looks at her Japanese American identity and ancestry.

If, to learn more about the internment is a key to understanding her father for Jenny, then her participation in the Manzanar memorial gives her the “affect” (Kaya Silverman 19), or the pre-lingual conveyance, to make sense of feelings of alienation she is not quite able to articulate throughout her journey.¹¹ Though Jenny did not experience the internment herself, it impacted her life indirectly in some very real ways. As a girl,

¹¹According to Kaja Silverman in “Girl Love,” “the affective legacy of the female subject’s Oedipal structuration is a profound melancholy” (18). It is the case because a girl’s affective tie to her mother is to be severed and displaced as she enters into the paternal order. To be melancholic about the mother-daughter, then, is the girl’s resistance against the paternal law, for the negative affect seeks to retrieve a female libido that is free of paternal regularization. In Jenny’s case, her re-connection with her father and her “mother culture”—namely, Japanese American culture within the US paternal nation-state—is her first step in the journey toward redeeming her identity.

she moves to Japan with her father in the hope of finding a more acceptable Japanese American environment. This fails, and they move back to the US—a second trans-Pacific move that requires Jenny to change school for the third time during her formative years. Furthermore, before finishing high school, Jenny elopes with William to Berkeley because her father’s silence about the internment makes her feel less of an American, while being with William, the hippie teacher at a community college, makes her feel more like one.

In Jenny’s path towards identity redemption from the aforementioned setbacks, the car and the road play crucial roles. In a way, the changing nature of Jenny’s road trip, which begins as an elopement, transforms into fugitivity, and ends in a pilgrimage, is emblematic of the heterogeneity that the generation of Asian Americans who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement like Jenny faced when trying to find a common narrative around which to build racial grievances. The many cars that Jenny ditched and acquired materialize the detours and displacements she was put through as she invents and re-invents herself all to gain a sense of belonging to this country. The reasons behind Jenny’s abandonment of a car, and method to acquire another one, I argue, expose the consequence of and the need for revising a leftist radicalism that fails to do away with the same patriarchal system of the neo-colonial state that it aimed to assault.

Growing up in the 60s and 70s, partly in Japan, partly in California, Jenny did not learn of the Japanese internment until her schooling in Japan. Though not an internee herself, she feels that that chapter of history is of paramount importance as “the key to understand her father” and “being his daughter” (163). But like many internees of the

older generation, who opt to stay silent about the experience, Jenny's father coldly responds to her enthusiasm, inquiring, "why ask about that? All of that was a long time ago" (163). Feeling discouraged, Jenny turns to another source of identity politics: the antiwar movement, which turns out to be the force that drives her and her father apart, a rift that is widened by her relationship with William, leader of the "People's Army," whom she meets in a political science course in a community center at Berkeley.

One year after William is caught, Jenny relocates to Rhinebeck New York and reinvents herself by taking on a new career as a restorative artist in Mrs. Dolly's inherited home, Wildmoor, and assumes a new name Iris Wong, along with a new place of origin, San Francisco. Hiding behind the shield of the most common Chinese American last name, a fake heritage in a city that has the largest Chinese population in the US. Mrs. Dolly to trust her utterly, a move which is sealed by Mrs. Dolly's offer of her car to Jenny (68). Mrs. Dolly's car becomes an extension of Jenny's habitat from the "exceedingly small...scale situation at Wildmoor," and a time vessel that connects her from "the living rhythm of a distant time" (67) in there to the outside world.

Every evening during the winter, Jenny reads the newspaper in the car while "blasting the heat, and the radio, slowly smoking at least half a pack of cigarettes" (66). It is during one of these reveries that she belatedly learns of the end of the Vietnam War. The article in the *New York Times* features "Mrs. Nguyen Thi Binh, foreign minister of the Vietcong provisional Revolutionary Government, wearing an amber ao dai with embroidery, and Mrs. Rogers a dress with a red top and navy shirt" (66). To Jenny, the report's trivial focus on the women politicians' sartorial choices makes a mockery of her

life as a fugitive taking a reprieve in a car who gave up freedom to “demolish this war” (66). Here, Mrs. Dolly’s car—which is parked by the side of a quiet upstate New York river so cloistered that it only moved when a flock of “frantic honking geese” arrive—throws into relief Jenny’s state of fugitivity, which is not only physically far away from the political reality, but also lagging one month behind, stuck in between sometime at turn of the 20th century (of the Wildmoor) and the February of 1973 (the diegetic time of the narrative). At the same time, the car offers Jenny temporary comfort, functioning like a transitory object that assists her re-integration back to the reality. But she has not quite arrived at a total state of individuality yet, because Jenny’s access to the car is tied down by her indentured service to Mrs. Dolly; eventually, Jenny will achieve delirious velocity in it, but only after purchasing it from her in a scene that will be discussed later in my analysis.

What this rather quiet scene reveals is that the car configures a chronotope for Jenny that is separated from the outside world; and she will remain stuck in this space of detachment so long as the car is somebody else’s property. This point becomes apparent after Jenny leaves her job with Mrs. Dolly to be the go-between of a former comrade, Frazer, and the three high-profile fugitives from the West coast—Juan and Yvonne (a couple), together with their new convert Pauline. During Yvonne and Juan’s failed robbery of Mr. Morton, an African American storeowner who falls victim to the couple’s Robin Hood Plan to rob from the rich, Jenny is assigned to be their getaway driver, and Yvonne’s outfit—a blue dress and a light coat—reminds Jenny of her green dress and white purse she wore on the day she planted a bomb in a federal building in east bay

(226). In the car, Jenny drifts off into an episode of *déjà vu* during which she relives the night following her bomb-planting gathering at the rooftop of Tom's Oakland apartment, anticipating the spectacular blow-up from across the bay: "Boom. That's all. Then a streamer of black smoke is angling away, with the wind" (230) as she reminisces. This detonative moment jolts Jenny back to the gory scene in front of her at present as Juan and Yvonne whose blue dress is now "spattered with black blood" (230) hobble toward her Volkswagen Beetle. They do not tell her what happened, but only scream at her: "Just drive!" As Jenny drives, the ride sucks her further back into the past; this time her wrists and forearms seem to have vivid memory, projecting what they have experienced in the past onto the present:

All the miles she'd driven up and down these roads now seemed to have been an accumulation leading up to this drive; she did not see what she did, didn't tell her hands to guide the wheel as they guided it. She held the memory of this drive in every cell of her body, and later it would seem that even those things that were happening now had already been part of the great mass of detail she knew. (230)

The tension that driving routines and habits impose on Jenny's body is intensified by the traumatic memories of Yvonne's open wound that is mashed together with Mr. Morton's blood. To Jenny, the present becomes the past in these moments—a conflation of stressors that is suggested by the abrupt juxtaposition of the diegetic present with the extra-diegetic past. As indicated by the block quote above, while driving, Jenny's finds the present uncanny, because while driving, she always seems to be complicit in something illicit: her role as getaway driver in the robbery of Mr. Morton evokes the bombing the federal building in the West Bay. In these cases, she is always somehow wrapped up in someone else's radicalism, carrying out somebody else's experiment. The

narrator's hint at Jenny's consciousness of her body is significant, because it is through this consciousness that Jenny contextualizes the diegetic present into her larger political perspective gained from the past about the rise and fall of radical organizations. As we learn from the page that follows the quotation above, Jenny's bodily-rooted memories bring her to the realization that her mental dependency on the anti-war, anti-establishment movement to claim a radical American identity is the cause that exposes her body to dangers once and again. Recognizing that the centrifugal force that spins out such a vicious cycle is the patriarchal structure that forms each radical group in which she participates—manifested by Juan now, and by William then—she knows that she must leave patriarchal leaders behind in order to preserve herself, both mentally and physically. To ditch Juan (and Frazer) specifically, her first step is to drive away from the cottage and then get rid of the Volkswagen Beetle that Juan and Yvonne have been driving (214).

Jenny begins her escape from Frazer's scheming by returning to Mrs. Dolly's garage to exchange Juan and Yvonne's Volkswagen for the finicky car she used to drive at Wildmoor—the best vehicle for her to pass on the road because of its clean record. Worth noticing in Jenny's car-claiming scene are the inflections of race and class during her negotiations with Mrs. Dolly. Because Mrs. Dolly failed to pay her properly for her work at Wildmoor, Jenny insists that she will only pay \$350 for the second-hand car that Dolly claims is now worth \$500. Dolly comes up with a counter-offer, reasoning that even though it's not a car that she drives, not having it around would be a "handicap" (244) for her. By insisting that \$350 is all that she has, Jenny wins the negotiation and

drives away in the car, proudly telling her traveling companion Pauline that the car is all that “she has left [for herself] from two years of hard work” (246). The racial and class dimensions of this transaction are worth mulling over because they bespeak a historical legacy of Asian labor’s (im)mobility in this country. In her seminal work *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe makes the case that 19th century America economy was built upon the labor of immigrant workers; Wildmoor a 19th century building, reflects this history and continues to rely on the indentured service of laborers of color. Jenny’s purchase of the car with almost half of the price Dolly’s calls for is therefore a rare scenario in which a laborer of color wins her fair share of capital from an abusive, patriarchal institution. Jenny’s acquisition of her car foreshadows that her journey into freedom will be one that dis-embeds herself from a patriarchal structure that displaces and debilitates its subjects through centralized socioeconomic power.

As Jenny puts the getaway vehicle behind her, she feels that safety is within reach. But, as her cross-country road trip unfolds, it becomes clear that her new car does not necessarily bring her a new start, but instead, throws into relief the role her Asian body plays in marking her as different and jeopardizing her safety. This following is the omniscient narrator’s encapsulation of Jenny’s paranoia, one partly caused by her Asian body, and partly by others’ projection and imposition onto it: “she had stayed for too long with those people, and had let them leach into her system as if they were water, and she had been parched, and their troubles had somehow been hers” (247). The metaphor that Jenny’s body is an empty vessel filled with other people’s troubles remains true even after she leaves the squad behind. In the Midwest, Jenny is constantly confused and

conflated as the face of Asia, where she is called a “China doll” (264), asked where she is originally from and whether she is an “Eskimo” or “Crow Indian” (276). Such stereotypes that attempt to verbally confine Jenny’s mobility by tracking her Asian ancestral origins reveal to her that the road is a vessel where racial signification is concentrated. In this light, the road isn’t a safe haven to her because of her body’s hypervisibility, but, at the same time, thanks to the blinding effect of typecasting, she is given a temporary reprieve hiding her true fugitive identity behind her Asian body.

But Jenny’s reprieve does not last. Her car fails her amidst pouring rain in the middle of the Missouri plains. During her wait for a rescue, she becomes convinced she will be captured when the police respond to her breakdown. This paranoid, isolating experience in turn forces her, and to some extent, her passenger, Pauline, to come to terms with the bounded-ness of the body, and to understand their *being* as a sort of co-existence between the flesh and nature.

The scene takes place in Missouri when her car breaks down during a rainstorm. A passing truck driver spots her car’s flashing headlights and appears to be coming to their rescue. What ensues however is an episode of slapstick that nearly undoes Jenny and Pauline: after the driver parks the truck at the highway’s shoulder, and just as he approaches Jenny, offering to jump start her car, his pregnant wife calls him back because the truck is beginning to sink in the mud on which hold of the truck’s is parked. Worse still, the truck starts to tilt towards one side. In the fear that the truck overturns, the driver calls the police.

Faced with all this drama, Jenny is speechless, standing in the rain in soaking jeans, which start to pull down from her waist, and her shirt all wet, sticking to her body as a second skin. But the thought of an immanent capture seems surprisingly liberating to her: as the narrator tells us, “None of this seemed to matter at all. Her identity, Pauline’s, the consequence if they were discovered [...] the elements swept them away. She felt simplified. They were alive, after all” (260). Rain here has a spiritually purging effect—each raindrop that drips on Jenny’s skin is a reminder of her lively sensorium and the bounded-ness of her living body.

If the car is the hermeneutic through which Jenny learns to live with bodily confinement, then its breakdown teaches her to stop fighting her body. This newfound epiphany becomes obvious when she finds out that the police are coming and that there is no way she and Pauline can escape: eventually they give in, “they sat, feeling blank, Jenny tried to get out of her jeans but it was too difficult. Not wanting to flood her unfeeling core with frustration, she put off retrying the engine as long as she could” (261). But the worst did not happen: the police did not recognize their fugitive faces and even offer help to towing their car out of the rain.

After this episode where the two cadres make a spectacle of themselves, Jenny and Pauline begin to plan their routes more strategically—they deliberately wander up North and down South in the Midwest. Their rhizomatic movement, slowly crawling towards the west, draws out a cross-country map of fugitivity from coast to coast; in the space between, they turn into animals of life instincts, subsisting on the moving ground. In captivity, the pair of female fugitives finds new ways to correlate themselves with the

world such that their minds do not feel detained. From Pauline's kidnapping by Juan and Yvonne, to Jenny's feeling of being detained by her body, to their besiegement by the police under pouring rain, they learn—in Deleuze and Guattari's words—a lesson of *becoming* “elemental” (260), feeling at ease with nature and time. The state of captivity appears to have brought out in the two cadres a nomadic consciousness to be resourceful about the things left behind in the creation of a line of flight.

Though Choi may not have read the feminist critiques of *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus*, *American Woman* echoes the sentiments of feminist Deleuzians like Susan Merrill Squier who criticizes Deleuze's formulation of “becoming woman” for flattening out the historicity of women. I make this claim because Choi's novel is meticulous in articulating the different histories behind Pauline's and Jenny's becoming of a fugitive: while Jenny is an Asian American terrorist, descendent of an internee, Pauline is a wealthy renegade who despises her billions of inheritance. Their experiences may be compatible but their histories are far from alike.

Jenny later visualizes her preferred subjective formation to the reader as the molecular form of a “cell” (358) that keeps on dividing and growing before aggregating into a legible entity. This metaphor provides us with a lens to read Pauline's relationship with Jenny as two irreducibly individual units of organism—aggregating together—separated by their ancestral and class differences. The narrator articulates Jenny's and Pauline's “cellular difference” in a scene when the two fugitives drive by the Crow Indian country: as Pauline is enthralled by the vastness of the land, saying “I've never seen anything like this” Jenny responds, not verbally, but silently, only to herself,

“Pauline had been here before [...] She might have grown up rich, but where had that money come from? From people who’d gotten here first, that was all, when this land lawless and even more vast. People who’d stuck in it. Killed enough, grabbed enough. Never looked back” (285). Here Pauline’s face is a palimpsest on which Jenny sees reflected the white settler colonial history of the American West. Race and class, then, are historical markers signifying the irreducible divide between the two fugitives. Though they are now sitting in the same car, and appear to be sharing the same fate, the road can never catch them up on the same pace because of their different starting points, whose distance also forecasts the discrepancies in where their respective fugitivities land them.

Jenny and Pauline’s lives as fugitives end in Oakland when FBI agents raid their apartment. Both women are indicted for taking auxiliary roles in the killing of Mr. Morton. Jenny’s bombing of the recruitment center is largely ignored. And both women receive lenient sentences, which Jenny attributes to the privilege they inherited from their race and class, respectively: in Jenny’s framing, they “got off easy” because of the racial and class prejudice that worked to their advantage.

After their release, Pauline and Jenny never reconnect in person. It’s only through reports on TV that Jenny finds out about Pauline’s marriage to her security guard. Given the intimacy of Jenny and Pauline’s relationship on their trip across the Midwest, Jenny and Pauline’s break, post-release, comes as a surprise. Though their relationship were not homosexual in the conventional sense, because they never had sexual intercourse, their intimacy, which Jenny characterizes as too “hazy” to materialize into anything concrete, curiously functions to prompt Jenny to a different understanding of activism. If seen from

affect theorist Kaja Silverman's perspective, Jenny's intimacy with Pauline creates an opportunity for her to cross-identify as white. This racial cross-identification in the sexual imaginary is crucial because it is only afterwards that Jenny realizes that becoming a white woman does not necessarily make her feel more American. Moreover, their "girl love" allows Jenny to have access to what Silverman calls the "negative Oedipal mother," a figure that re-connects her to her heritage cultures (Japanese and feminine), the first step, according to post-Freudian psychoanalysis's prediction, towards making Jenny a loved and lovable Japanese American activist. And since Jenny's mother died after having suffered through an unhappy marriage to Jim Shimada, Jenny's "girl love" with Pauline is a touchstone in her path to becoming a more fully agented Asian American.

In Kaja Silverman's article "Girl Love," she makes the distinction between negative and positive Oedipal complexes. In the traditional Freudian family romance—the positive Oedipal complex—under the influence of the patriarch, the daughter is taught to "abandon" her mother as a "love-object", and to hate her because of her lack of phallus (15). Three results typically emerge out of this: the daughter will become a lesbian, "clinging with defiant self-assertiveness to her threatened masculinity" (qtd. in Silverman 18); the daughter will become involved in an incestuous relationship with the father; last but not least (and certainly not the least because this is the most likely) the daughter will be displaced from the mother, and mother-daughter relationship foreclosed. According to Silverman, accessing this foreclosed relation—which she calls the "negative Oedipal mother," labeling the daughter's "emotional investment in femininity"—will re-open a type of "girl love" after "puberty"—the period when the "libido" is supposed to have

been regularized by the patriarchy. “Extending girl love well beyond the limits of childhood” (19) does not necessarily lead to lesbianism, Silverman continues, but will certainly make the daughter a lovable and loving partner in relationships. As Silverman further adds, and David Eng’s later work shows, “girl love” has implications for racial reparation, too, because the same “negative Oedipal mother” can also be activated to repair broken relationships with a racial subject and her heritage culture from which she has been severed and displaced by the white paternal state.

Jenny and Pauline’s “girl love” permits them to re-gain access to the “negative Oedipal mother.” According to the narrator, the couple’s craving for sex erupts during “nights that they fight” when “Pauline almost phones up her mother, and Jenny her father” (281). Their eventual pressing and grinding against each other do not culminate in a consummative sexual orgasm. The pleasure they derive from the foreplay rather comes from the shattering of the self through which they gain possession of each other. Here, their foreplay can be seen as a substitution of the cuddling and nurturing they wanted and did not receive from their real mothers—the mother Pauline desires to phone but cannot, given her circumstances, and the mother Jenny wants to talk to but cannot, because she is dead. The reciprocal companionship and care somehow transport them to a primordial state of comfort where their parentage and history are dislodged: “For a long moment, they don’t remember their childhood homes, what their parents look like. Prior history all seems unreal. They don’t remember that they are two girls, fabulous prey, on the run from the law everywhere” (281). Emerging out of their “sticky cocoon” is their faint “girl love”—a “haze too dense to be aroused into lust” (281). In their sexless, interracial love,

they become each other's mother: a cross-identification through which they vicariously take up each other's racial positions (Jenny white, Pauline Asian), positions that they have fantasized about because they hold the promise of belonging in different ways—for Pauline, it is the sense of being a part of the poor colored mass, while for Jenny, the cross-identification is with white entitlement to this country. The revelation resulting from this, as Silverman says, is a “de-idealization”—with Jenny finding out that being a white woman, or even being a white man, will not make her feel more American. The new perspective that Jenny gains is that women, racial minorities, the economically and politically disenfranchised are all victims of imperial capitalism:

It was capitalism that caused all these problems. Their lives had been compromised from the start by a legacy of imperial violence they could either have condoned through inaction, thus enabling violence itself, or resisted, thus consigning themselves to a marginal place with regard to the sullied mainstream. (283)

Here, although Jenny correctly identifies capitalism to be the common enemy of women, people of color, and other disenfranchised populations, common victimhood does not necessarily put them on a level playing field. As Jenny's and Pauline's different ways of securing early release from prison show—with Jenny's judge citing the overwhelming support for her outside the court everyday from the “Japanese and Filipino and Korean and Chinese” (which she insists she does not deserve); and Pauline's expensive lawyer defending her complicity in Juan and Yvonne's murdering of Mr. Morton as crime committed under the influence of others—the divide between them is skin deep. What “girl love” ignited in Jenny, at least, is an affective intensity that re-kindles her belief in collective revolution in which a multiplicity of minority groups collaborates in resistance

against common enemy. And the key to such collaboration is to respect the differences that separate them.

American Woman the novel is just like its character Jenny—they both attempt to abstract race only to highlight the irreducibility of it. In Jenny’s ideal political organization which she briefly takes part in Oakland—the self-defense interest group on guns—people of different races and generations do not necessarily imitate or become one another; but rather, they co-exist. In fact, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s formation of being “singular plural” would be helpful in illuminating Jenny, and the novel’s recommendation for Asian American group formation. For Luc-Nancy, the state of “being with” constitutes “being” (30); and the “with” is where the accents should fall.

In the monograph *Being Singular Plural*, he professes,

Coessentiality signifies the essential sharing of essentiality, sharing the guise of assembling, as it were. This could also be put in the following way: if Being is being-with, then it is, in its being-with, the *with* that constitutes being [...] Power is neither exterior to the members of the collective nor interior to each one of them, but rather consists in the collectivity as such. (30)

The novel ends on a scene that coincides with Luc-Nancy’s description of co-essentiality: this sequence begins with Jenny driving her father to a picnic at the Manzanar War Relocation Center. The temporality and geography in this scene are illustrative of the novel’s theorization of an Asian American singular plurality: after the pair passes a relic of the concentration camp, “a magnificent wall for an abandoned and overgrown prison” they are greeted by a faraway banner saying “MANZANAR OR BUST!” (369). As they approach the camp, they see “a scattering of cars parked at all kinds of angles on the scrub-covered ground, and the small forms of people moving purposefully on the floor of

the desert beneath the vast peaks.” Plurality here is represented by an agglomeration of cars, a gathering of internees and their descendants—like Jenny and the young man who welcomes them with a taiko drum clutched to his chest, whose age is about “the same age [her father] had been brought” (369) to the camp. Meanwhile, the specific history of internment conveys the event’s singularity. As the ending paragraphs suggest, Jenny keeps a respectful distance from her ancestral history. Her respect is indicated by her affective orientation towards her father (thanking him for bringing her a bandana that protects her ears from the intrusion of the blowing sand), and her bodily position—“following her father” assisting the group to set up the picnic. This road trip, just like Jenny’s previous ones, isn’t a “touching ground,” or recovery of origin, that confers meaning on Jenny’s life, because it is not a ground for her to claim. But her affective intensity towards her heritage culture creates a psychic space that is capacious enough for a reparation with the nation to take place.

Indeed, the final sequence doesn’t provide the reader a real resolution, for it is a rather quiet. But the landscape’s openness offers important insights into how we, young Asian Americans who did not go through spectacular legal exclusion, might do Asian American politics. The answer is that that we, as a group, of different ethnicities and generations should be respectful of historical differences. What Jenny’s affective intensity towards internment and her failure to find a home in the anti-war movement demonstrates is that we as activists can’t be effective in order to raise political awareness if we don’t know our history. And after we know our histories, we have to reckon with that fact that we can’t transcend them. What we can do, however is accept the power that

comes from “being with” them. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, we are always in a state of co-existence with someone else, some version of our past selves. In that light, Asian America’s present and future is always already bound up with the racist past—but each moment is separated from another (and therefore bounded). And respect for and enforcement of these temporal-spatial boundaries are the keys to claiming the collective power in the assembly.

Jenny’s road trip charts out a different course of settling into the American landscape. Rather than mastering or conquering the land, Jenny illustrates the logic of “being with” it. On the road, she realizes that she cannot entirely escape from the country’s racism and sexism that are so tied to the history of the patriarchal, settler colonial state. But her newfound sense of harmony with her body and the history that accompanies it guides her to a psychic space that is conducive to the pursuit of reparative justice. For Jenny to realize this, she must access her “negative Oedipal mother,” an affective intensify that allows her to overcome her feeling of displacement from mainstream America and her heritage culture.

By presenting us with Jenny’s circuitous trip toward self-discovery, Choi reinvigorates the structure of the road narrative, using the form to reflect on the process of becoming Asian American, and in this way, providing a new framework to complicate the theorization of Lisa Lowe’s American Asian heterogeneity as a *being singular-plural*. Each segment of Jenny road trip symbolizes a step of displacement away from the mythical origin of Asian America. Even though Jenny eventually arrives at Manzanar, the internment camp does not necessarily complete her journey to becoming Asian

American. And in fact, the novel presents a course towards reparation that is more complex: having learned the lessons from her identity crises—traumatic events that arose out of her over-identification with the Third World that rendered her prey to anti-corporate, anti-government groups that are riddled with savior complexes—Jenny respects distance from her ancestor’s traumatic past, and the boundaries between her and other people’s troubles. But she remains attuned to them and realizes the need to forge forward with them. Jenny’s renewed political awareness is shown by her choice to return a life of radicalism, one effected not by spectacular violence, but through quiet resistance: the residing in a commune, the cultivation of a farm, the squeezing of fruit for a juice bar, all in cultivation of a “together-ness” with nature and its people.

As this chapter traces the horizontal vectors and affective registers of Jenny’s and *Tajima-Peña’s road trip*, it reveals that there is no such place called Asian America concretely demarcated on the US land. In response to this, both women structured alternative relations with the nation by connecting with its people and nature. Though there are cases in Asian American literary history where Asian Americans feel freer by moving “vertically”—such as by fleeing home and country altogether—*My American* and *American Woman* posit that the US remains the “terra firma” (Wong 158) for Asian Americans because this country is where their communities are rooted, and where life-affirming relationships are made. This is especially evident in Jenny’s and Tajima-Peña’s “home-coming” scenes, where they turn familial unifications inside out by re-shaping the family from a nuclear unit to an open platform for the construction of cross-racial alliance (Tajima-Peña) and facilitation of communal resistance (the Shimadas). In this way, they

show that Asian Americans can claim a sense of belonging to this country by moving horizontally, by affectively investing in lateral filial and affiliative networks. Vehicular movement, as *My America* and *American Woman* highlight, is fundamental in this process.

Choi's and Tajima-Peña's vehicular movements is integral to the process of community mobilization because it visualizes and make palpable for the characters inside the narratives, and readers outside of it, the ways Asian Americans' lives—though diverse—do intersect in their subjugation under the same imperial forces, albeit in different forms and at different times. Jenny's and Tajima-Peña journeys emphasize this by delineating the geography of Asian American history as it tracks how the Japanese American population has been concentrated and then dispersed, from the west to the east, and then the east to the west, before and after the internment. Both women's travels also uncover the history of Asian American geography by excavating stories of displacement in spaces where the dominant culture attempted to erase signs of racial oppression.

The creative freedom afforded by the genres of fiction and documentary enable Choi's and Tajima-Peña's historiographical work to become such dynamic maps of Asian American experience. The aesthetic and affective circuitry in *American Woman* and *My America* links up the internment, the civil rights movement, and the current moment as events taken place in the *longue duree* of Jenny's and Choi's activisms, allowing these narratives to create a cross-generational footing, or an entry point, for contemporary readers to feel history. That is, as readers identify with Jenny and Tajima-Peña, the identification renders the beginning chapters of Asian American history as contemporary

events, which serves to contextualize Asian Americans' continuous struggle for human justice at present as part of a "longer historical development" (105 Flatley).

Conclusion

My analysis of *My America* and *American Woman* wishes to get at the question that has vexed a cohort of scholars concerned with Asian American formalist criticism: how can attention to the "Asian American racialized literary tradition" (Tsou 7) allow us—Asian American and non-Asian American, alike—to imagine the racial group differently, free from the signs of submission and success that have long been attached to the Asian body? I argue that a renewed attention to narrative figurations will allow us to re-conceptualize Asian American culture as part of the counterculture. By incorporating traditional tropes in Asian American cultural productions, such as the family, and themes, like loss and displacement, into the genre of road narrative that is usually associated with white men's uninhibited vehicular freedom, Tajima-Pena's and Choi's work at once references the narrative tradition of the road narrative and revamps it by incorporating the imagination of an Asian American's liberation into depictions of the counterculture.

In fact, Tajima-Pena and Choi themselves have hinted at the Sixties as a period that is worthy of revisiting by Asian Americans. As Tajima Pena notes in the accompanying article of her documentary, the period's "cultural energy" is good for desegregating the ethnic and professional divides in the Asian American community at present. Whereas for Choi, as someone who grew up in the long Sixties, and did not read any Asian American literature until college, reimagining the Sixties offers her a point of

literary origin to compensate for the community's "lost artistic lore" (as she suggested in her interview with the Min Hyoung Song).

By writing back to the Sixties, Choi and Tajima-Pena remind us of the activism of the period, and the role of those protests in generating Asian American identity.

Producing and consuming art of that period allows Asian Americans as a collective to transform ourselves from objects to subjects of the counterculture. This feedback loop of writing and reading about the Sixties, I argue, charts out a new formation of the racial group's ontology: "singular plurality." Through this frame, different generations and ethnicities of Asian Americans can come to be with each other in a subjunctive past, all through and for the imagination of a future more just.

The framework of "singular plurality" is in fact not only crucial for building inter-ethnic and intergenerational coalition within Asian America; it is also foundational for Asian Americans to forge solidarity with other racial groups, such as African Americans. The next chapter will discuss that solidarity in detail.

Chapter Three

Forms of Conviction: Asian American Noir Fictions and the Law

Asian America, as we have been discussing so far, is not so much a permanent settlement as it is a constellation of relationships between the American land and its people. The people in question are immigrants of Asian descent, and the relations between them include the intimacies they have formed across generational and familial lines. What happens if we take the formulation of “singular plurality” a step further and consider Asian America as an affective threshold, as a collective unity forged on the basis of mutual aspiration for racial justice for all people of color?

This chapter attempts to answer these questions by homing in on scenarios when the “sliding” aesthetic and relationally adaptive strategies that are so integral to Asian America are employed in noir fiction. As with the road narrative we in an earlier chapter, the noir fictions here are infused with other narrative elements, including those of the intergenerational drama, veteran stories, lesbian fiction, and interracial romance. Sliding between multiple temporal, geographical, sexual and cultural perspectives, these noir fictions are equipped to register the imagination of a queer, hybrid, and inter-ethnic Asian America with more inclusive terms than those handed down by the American law, which has historically defined Asian American identity by exclusion.

Asian American Noir Fiction

Asian American detective fiction is flourishing in the new millennium. As exemplified by Naomi Hirahara’s Mas Arai mystery series (2004-13) and Ed Lin’s Robert Chow trilogy (2012-17), Asian American writers have engaged with the familiar

detective fiction tropes of suspense, drama, and insight while confronting the colonial origins of the genre.¹² As the critic Pamela Thoma puts it, Asian American detective fiction has recycled and repurposed the genre's imperialist conventions and concerns into "opportunities to address racism, specifically in the law" and the range of "anxieties" associated with "American social identity and belonging" (110).

Detective fiction has long been a prominent genre of nationalist entertainment in the West. It has achieved much of its popularity by preying upon audience's anxieties over racial and non-human others by positioning foreign bodies and extraterrestrial species as threats to the nation's safety. The fear that threatening figures of ethnic and sexual difference might prevail over the dominant white order has traditionally held readers in suspense, impelling them to turn the page in order to find out what will come next. Whether its plot follows the rules of a procedural drama or is organized around blood and gore or supernatural sightings, in a traditional work of detective fiction, a troubling disruption of the social order is introduced, developed, and resolved with a solution that puts a nervous reader's unease to rest, usually through a display of the detective's logic. The detective's achievement of certainty in the dénouement usually comes at the expense of the lives or freedom of minorities. As Marty Roth puts it: "in detective fiction, gender is genre" and the "genre is male" (xiv). We might also add that the genre is also usually white. Though there are occasional cameos of women and

¹² The list of detective fictions published after the millennium by Asian American writers goes on. But unlike Hirahara's and Lin's serial fictions, most of them are set outside of the US. These titles include Dale Furutani's *Kill the Shogun: A Samurai Mystery* (2001), Qui Xiaolong's *Death of a Red Heroine* (2003), and Diane Wei Liang's *Lake With No Name: A True Story of Love and Conflict in Modern China* (2003) among others.

people of color, they are usually auxiliary characters simply there to flesh out “[white] male desire and fear” as Peter Messent notes (qtd. in Gregoriou 54). Caroline Reitz further adds to the examination of the ideological inner workings of the detective genre as she excavates the colonial ambition embodied by the figures of the white male detective in 19th century British fiction. Arthur Conan Doyle’s renowned detective Sherlock Holmes is a prime illustration of the gendered and racial biases from the tradition. As a part of the British government’s intelligence network, Holmes’s investigation always brings the nation a step closer to the divulgence of the hidden lifestyles and aberrant habits of people at the margins of the British Empire. In other words, Holmes works for the empire in the data collection of lost populations: his forensic research generates information that enables British society to better understand, contain, and thereby make subjects of peripheral lives who would otherwise silently reside in London.

Given this racist legacy, it is understandable that Doyle’s Holmes has become the target of postcolonial and feminist critiques. In the anthology by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer (2016), the detective’s probing gaze is compared to the white male gaze of the phallogocentric state for turning non-cis-heterosexual male characters (and the populations they represent) into exotified “spectacles” (153). Even in the post-war versions of the detective genre, Orientalism remains and continues to reify xenophobia. In *The Memoirs of Solar Pons* (1951) series by the American writer August Derleth, who is known for writing pastiches of Sherlock Holmes after Doyle, Chinatown is depicted as a crime-ridden opium den and the character Fu Manchu is assigned the role of the ultimate antagonist.

Problematic as the racial history of the detective tradition, it is only by reading against the genre's prejudicial past that it is possible to come to a fuller appreciation of the subversion and innovation in Asian American noir fictions of the 21st century. For instance, Ed Lin's *Snakes Can't Run* (2010), hailed by Arthur Nersesian, as a masterpiece "reminiscent of the urban noir of Charles Willeford," offers up an immanent critique of the NYPD from the perspective of the Chinese American police officer, Robert Chow.¹³ As the sequel to his detective fictional debut *This Is A Bust* (2007), *Snakes* does not represent the restoration of peace in NYC Chinatown with the promotion of Robert into the detective track from his photo-op assignments.¹⁴ Instead, the novel realistically portrays the stasis of Chinatown's status as a ghettoized enclave crippled by persisting crimes despite the rising amount of policeman of color in the 5th Precinct. When making that observation, Lin tells the story of Robert's unmasking of the smuggling business disguised within an ostensibly benevolent, non-profit Chinese associations, which, as he later finds out, operates with the permission of the NYPD.

Nina Revoyr's *Southland* (2003) is another product of the post-millennial boom in the Asian American detective fiction: the novel juxtaposes the "hard" elements of policing and disciplining from the hard-boiled tradition with the "soft" feature of secrecy in noir fiction. As *LA Times* has it, *Southland* is "distinctively noir, but the point of view

¹³ For more accolade reviews of *Snakes* by Nersesian and others, see <http://www.edlinforpresident.com/books/snakes-cant-run/>

¹⁴ As Robert puts it himself in *Bust*, he is a "dummy" (139) hired to fulfill the station's PR duties like attending tong banquets, and showing up in pictures on Chinese-run newspaper.

is surprisingly rosy.” Composed of disparate episodes from the Ishida-Sakai family history that spans across more than half a century from WWII to the end of 20th century, the mystery of *Southland* began with Curtis Martindale, a stranger whose name curiously appeared on Frank Sakai’s will as the recipient of a million-dollar worth of inheritance.

In both of these 21st century noirs, the Asian American detectives are not merely working to right past representational wrongs by injecting positive depictions into American popular culture; rather, Lin and Revoyr use their protagonists to encourage readers to contemplate the ways Asian American identity and social formations are structured in the face of the US nation-state’s securitization of borders and white supremacy. In the beginnings of *Snakes* and *Southland*, both Robert Chow and Jackie Ishida live in bubbles of color-blindness, in which they believe in a “nonracial society,” an ideal that began to emerge as an ideal during the Civil Rights Movement in the 60s and 70s (when *Snakes* was set) and is fully integrated into part of the multicultural landscape of the 80s and 90s (in which Jackie grew up). Recent scholarship has contested the idea that color-blindness might accompany or lead to racial progress. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva points out in *Racism without Racists: Color Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality* (2003), the notion of color-blindness poses an impediment to raising racial consciousness because it is all too easily co-opted by dominant white culture to maintain white dominance, notably through policies that are made in the name of “color-blindness” which ended up denying the redistribution of resources and care to minority populations that have been historically harmed by racial prejudice. The role of “color blindness” in *Southland* and *Snakes* confirms Bonilla-Silva’s critique.

Snakes's Robert and *Southland*'s Jackie are both victims of racism that hides behind a mask of color blindness. Robert, for instance, joined the military and the police force to prove his American-ness. Growing up in the affluent neighborhood of Gardena, Jackie is kept away from the history of her Japanese ancestry by her family, and feels as if her life is as "flat and textureless" as a "starved white sheet" (146). Karen Shimakawa's psychoanalytic analysis of the effects of assimilation sheds light on both characters' conditions. Shimakawa would diagnose both protagonists as abject figures, because Jackie's and Robert's American-ness is dependent upon their "jettisoning" the parts in them that are foreign, or Asian (10). The procedural dramas in *Southland* and *Snakes* foreground and cross-examine the relationship between the Asian American detectives' pasts and the presents, moments when the clandestine history of miscegenation in Jackie's family, and the illegal immigration records of Robert's father, are brought to the surface. These pieces of information were previously concealed because their exposure would threaten the nation-state's constructions of racial containment and identity purity. These are the sorts of secrets, that as David Li tells us in *Imagining the Nation* (2001), "de-realized" (8) Asian Americans' articulation of their American-ness. Li's notion of mediated embodiment allows us to re-evaluate Jackie's and Robert's initial appearances as fully assimilated Americans. Indeed, in light of Li's analysis, it's clear that Jackie's and Robert's sense of themselves as "non-racial" is structured and dominated by whiteness. Whiteness enfolds their Asian heritage, and "immobilized [their] race- and culture-specific national embodiment of the Asian American" (8). Whiteness also has everything to do with the crimes that they are going to

investigate, for its power and dominance explains the need for secrecy around racially impure subjects.

Snakes and *Southland* follow Jackie's and Robert's remobilization of their Asian American identities over the course of their inspections of police brutality in Crenshaw (a struggling neighborhood in LA that used to be populated by African, Asian and Chicano Americans) and smuggling in NYC Chinatown (where illegal and legal Chinese immigrants co-exist). What the Asian American detectives ultimately obtain for themselves and their communities is by no means a transcending subjectivity that is entirely agential and free from Asian abjection. The history of Asian abjection remains a central part of Jackie's and Robert's new-found identities by the end when they are "reborn" (Kristeva 156) with the knowledge that abjection is an a-priori aspect of their beings. *Southland* and *Snakes* do not fantasize about an easy way out of systemic oppression. And in fact, both novels conclude with rather grim endings: *Southland* closes out with a flashback that travels back to a scene when Curtis is waiting for Frank's news to gift him the corner store right before Curtis is cornered into a freezer by Officer Thomas; and *Snakes* ends with Robert barely getting away from a lawsuit of safety endangerment leveled against him by the "snake head" he confronted for smuggling illegal immigrants into NY who was subsequently found innocent by the 5th Precinct. Unlike in traditional detective fictions, order is *not* restored at the end of *Southland* and *Snakes*: abusers of the law (including Officer Thomas, and the gangsters along with their collaborators in NYC Chinatown) are still roaming around—yet to be brought to face the juridical disciplining and punishment they deserve. The "disappointment and frustration"

(210) that reading *Snakes* and *Southland* produce allow them to be read as what Julia Kristeva describes as post-war horrors: the negative affects they give off (in contrast to the positive ones emerged by the end of traditional detective fictions) engage readers in the process of accepting and living with abjection.

A brighter note is offered in Li's discussion of what literature can do to mitigate the cultural condition of abjection. Speaking specifically about Asian abjection, Li argues that Asian Americans are abject because of the contradictions within and arising out of the American law: he says, "in terms of the law, the Asian American is, by all official accounts, identical to 'authentic citizens' (in particular the 'free white' descendants of the Mayflower) and its given equal protection under the law"; however "such identification of the Asians Americans as possible representatives of the national imagination has not yet occurred" (8). He then goes on to explain that even after 1945, when legal exclusion acts were outlawed, Asians in the US has yet to gain inclusion, because "the regulatory function of the law in defining citizens and aliens is increasingly subsumed by mass media and public education" which "continue to secure common sense of Asian Americans as alien, thus both precluding their sense of national entitlement and inhabiting their American actualization" (8). *Southland* and *Snakes* offer updates to Li's project: these texts propose that an Asian American actualization of America-ness is already here, where Asian Americans' terms of citizenship are re-drawn not by a wholesale abandonment of existing systems but by revisions of them.

Revoyr's and Lin's narratives resourcefully worked on and through the noir genre's concern and convention to expose the way law and law enforcement have

rendered generations of Asian Americans abject. Departing from Asian abjection, Revoyr and Lin further imagine what else Asian Americans can embody in their assertion of belonging to this country. The novelists find alternative space for Asian American actualization in inclusion: more specifically, in their forging of Afro-Asian coalition out of the racial triangle (which is supposed to antagonize Asian Americans against African Americans), and the establishment of a charitable legacy to pursue justice (in contrast to the blood genealogy with which whiteness established legal entitlement to the nation).

Noir, as Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo assert, is an especially apt literary vessels to explore the leaky borders of the nation and the arbitrariness of identity and social formation; as Oliver and Trigo put it, “if abjection is not what is evil or unclean but rather calls into question proper identity borders, then racial ambiguity threatens the boundaries of proper identity”; what the horror in noirs then dramatize is the anxiety around “racial otherness and racial ambiguity” (5). Characters of mixed-race descent and of questionable legal status, are, therefore rendered abject in noir “so that the proper self-identity [of whiteness] can be formed” (5). *Southland* and *Snakes* act as counterpoints to the white noirs that Oliver and Trigo examine: they are told and, importantly, *investigated*, from the vantage points of the “abjected,” those who fall victims in the process of the US-nation-state’s securitization of white identities and spaces.

As Asian American detectives, Jackie and Robert’s investigation subverts the traditional conventions of noir. Instead of working to repress and suppress the Other, they confront it, and in confronting it, they are forced to contend with the consequences of America’s legacy of oppressing racial minorities. The interracial identities and illegal

histories they unearth bear witness to the complex history of America's racial past. In contradistinction to the noir fictions that reify white dominance, or later noirs that testify hopelessly to the inevitability of disorder, Jackie's and Robert's investigations release these subjects by freeing them from physical locations of confinement. Following the lead of noir critic Joan Copjec, I am calling these liminal spaces locked rooms. Whether it is the locked freezer in Frank's corner store in Crenshaw, the tunnel behind Don's apartment wall, or the safe deposit box of family records that Eddie retrieves from San Francisco and sends across the continent, the opening of these locked rooms re-orders the grammar of racial lives and relations that has been overdetermined by the American law, which, according to Joshua Chambers-Letson, "is a source of injustice" to Asian Americans (68) and "the will of the [bourgeoise class made into a law for all]" (35).

To chart out those new orders, I read Revoyr's *Southland* and Lin's *Snakes* as noir fictions that are enmeshed in the ramifications of the law.¹⁵ Though mostly a label for films, noir is not, as the noir scholar Lee Horsley points out, an exclusive label of certain a style of cinema; instead, it is a designation of a "narrative pattern" (7) that has purchase

¹⁵ In *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (2010) Betsy Huang has treated *Snakes*'s prequel, *This is a Bust*, as a detective fiction, and so has Monica Chiu's *Scrutinized!: Surveillance in Asian North American Literature* (2014) done to *Southland*. Methodologically, my analysis departs from them by focusing exclusively on noir. This is done in observance of what Joan Copjec in *Shades of Noirs* (182) has encapsulated as the waning of the Oedipal father's desire (that which structures the signifying system in detective fictions when the detectives represent the law in the restoration of order as they securitize borders and count populations), and the advent of the drive, or individual jouissance, in contemporary society (as represented by the rise of noirs where morally ambivalent detectives are not extensions of the law, but private investigators or renegade police officers who go after the failings and blind spots of the law).

for a range of texts including films and fictions that demonstrate specific a mood and visual style. In the following, I analyze the affective and spatial dimension of noir in *Snakes* and *Southland* to home in on the way these elements shape the racial spaces and subjects that are violated during the state's securitization of the white-hetero-patriarchy. *Snakes* and *Southland*, as a whole, throw into relief the horror produced by the national securitization which goes by the name of Asian abjection.

To fully lay bare the condition of Asian abjection in Asian American noirs, I will first review Copjec's theory of the locked room to understand how the erection of borders served in the nation-state's demarcation of the boundaries between subjects and non-subjects. Against that backdrop, I then will trace, via sustained close reading, how Jackie and Robert venture into liminal geographies and histories that are marked off by the nation-state to conceal the violence of securitizations inflicted upon generations of ethnic Americans. During their moments of transgression, Jackie and Robert, I argue, reposition racial enclaves from spaces saturated with regulative and constraining strictures that stifle "racial identity and knowledge" (Kennedy 227) to territories of possibility that "engender and organize meaningful and rewarding relations" (Chang 26). In *Southland* and *Snakes*, these relations include the Ishidas' new-found kinship with James Lanier, Curtis's cousin on the Martindale side; and Robert's shared brotherhood with Vandyne, a black police officer who is also a Vietnam veteran. Through these relations, Jackie and Robert re-define the Asian American embodiment of American-ness (qua protection by and participation in the nation) from abjection (which gained Asian Americans inclusion into

the country by their self-negation) to the pursuit of “transracial inspirations” (Parikh 2) towards racial justice.

From the literal room of Frank Sakai’s corner store to the figurative room that is Jackie’s closet, *Southland*’s locked rooms contain personal and historical secrets that violate dominant sexual and racial orders, and normative categories of the law. Given the centrality of the concept in Revoyr’s noir (and that of Lin’s), the locked room, and its accompanying corpses, secrets and taboos, require further explanation.

The Locked-room Mystery

In *Shades of Noir*, Joan Copjec historicizes noir in the long history of detective fiction, a genre that Copjec argues rose to prominence in tandem with the emergence of the study of statistics, whose analysis of populations paved the ground for the foundation of modern nation-states. In her chapter “The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal,” Copjec further lays out the unexpected connection between the locked-room mystery and the securitization of the modern nation-state. She begins by saying that the invention of statistics elevated the pre-modern sovereign to an empirical sovereign, providing it a scientific recourse to categorize people, assert claims over certain populations, and withhold protection from those that it does not claim. Statistics also turns peoples into subjects, accordingly, changing the relations between people from the “oceanic feelings of charity or resemblance” to those marked by “formal differences” (175). According to Copjec, the German philosopher and mathematician Gottlob Frege’s concept of “the suture” (173) was instrumental in this process of difference making. Per Frege, “a suture” is that which solders a set of numbers that would otherwise be indefinitely expanding.

Though it is “empty of content” (173) a suture sets the limits for a group, closing it “without the loss of any interchangeable elements” (173).

Just as Frege’s suture frames and delimits numbers within a set, borders establish the boundaries of nation-states, helping to establish the contours of the nation-state’s sovereignty, its people’s relations, and theirs with those outside of it. Because noir fictions rely so heavily on borders, the anxieties about proper boundaries and juridical relations they provoke in their audiences often mirror the fears that surround and invest the nation-state itself. When read from a scholarly perspective, the noir trope of the locked room is therefore an especially effective hermeneutic for troubling the construction of national borders as arbitrary markers with violent implications for those they exclude.

Not unlike the statistical concept of the suture, borders are content-less, but significant because they are where the nation’s selves and others intersect. Detectives in noirs inquire into that liminal intersection. In order to further analyze the function of the locked room as an analogue for the nation-state, Copjec read’s Frege’s suture through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, positioning it as part of the “the real.” In these terms, the real is opposed to the symbolic—that which undergirds the order of the oedipal father. Similarly, in terms of the nation-state—the law of the white-hetero-patriarchy—“the real” is that which resists order and is loosened from the representation of significations. In noirs, “the real” takes liminal forms: in the words of Copjec, the real encompasses “details that can never be completely enumerated” (177) by the modern state’s police force and technology. Working on the side of “the real” in the exposure of

the failure of the law are detectives in noir. From the locked rooms, they procure the “clue, corpse, or letter” (177) that testifies to the negligence of the police force, and more fundamentally, the violence of the oedipal order that the law represents.

Copjec’s reading of the relationship between the boundaries and policing of the nation-state through Lacan’s view of the real helps us to understand why the locked room mystery is paradoxical. In a locked room, the mystery is centered on the liminality that is and is not accounted for by the sovereign. To unpack this paradox, Copjec refers to the famous interview between François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock in which they discuss a scene Hitchcock always wanted to include in *North by Northwest* (1959). That scene is set along the assembly line of a Ford factory, where Cary Grant is having a conversation with an anonymous foreman. As both men are speaking, marveling at the efficiency of the assembly, echoing each other with cries of “isn’t that wonderful!” they “open the door to” a freshly assembled car, and “out drops a corpse” (172).

The corpse that falls from the freshly assembled Ford automobile is a referent of “the real” that exists within the signifying chain of the symbolic that the assembly line comes to stand in for. Though “empty in content,” the corpse functions as the suture, or “the non-empirical object” which the oedipal father of the Ford Company co-opts from “the real” to assert its sovereignty over its signifying territory and to mark its boundary. This illustration reveals “the obligatory addition” (materialized by the corpse) necessary in the foreclosure of a group (177).

The detective—played by Grant—is an outsider coming into the system of the assembly line. What he pursues is the ignorance which the automobile company tries to

eliminate. His curiosity about the corpse runs up against the system of the symbolic, because his effort goes after its suture in the scenario when “the symbolic visibly fails to dis-ambiguate itself” from the life that the sovereign takes and depends on in marking and securing its sovereignty (178). If it had not been for Grant’s inspection of the assembly line, the corpse would have continued on down the line, and the audience would not know that the sovereign is always at work in the Ford factory though there is no apparent representation of it in sight.

Copjec’s analysis of the paradoxical nature of the locked room is crucial to opening up the critique of the law and law enforcement as white hetero-patriarchal signifying systems in *Southland* and *Snakes*. Copjec would call the corpses, secrets and taboos in *Southland* and *Snakes* “the trace[s] of the un-narrated,” “without [them] the narrated world and the group would cease to exist” (176). The noir, in other words, arises out of white identity and the white nation-state’s anxiety about unstable orders between black and white, the legal and the illegal, the death and the living, the inside and the outside. The corpses of murder victims (among other subjects of the real) defy the enumeration of the symbolic order because they are hidden by and from it in the first place. In *Southland* and *Snakes*, the (re)surfacing of liminal subjects (and their in-between legal, racial and sexual identities) are the return of the jettisoned/repressed, functioning like “hard rocks” of the “the real” that crack open the “other side” of law and order.

Copjec does not consider race in her analysis, yet her unpacking of the affective, psychological and geopolitical epistemologies of the locked room and its

accompaniments illuminate, especially, *Southland's* depiction of the American law's segregation of blacks and Asians for the safety of whiteness before and after the Civil Rights Movement. Her reading is equally helpful in making clear the white hetero-patriarchal order that is always at work in the enforcement of the law, even when it is hidden, hiding in the shadowy corners at the crime scenes of state-sanctioned violence against in-between subjects in the securitizing of white borders and identities.

Nina Revoyr's *Southland*

Jackie Ishida's investigation of Curtis Martindale's death in 1965 during the Watts Riot follows the trajectory of a classic locked room mystery. Puzzled by the unfamiliar name which appears on her grandfather, Frank Sakai's will, Jackie embarks on an inquiry that leads her to her long-lost uncle, Curtis Martindale, her grandfather's illegitimate son with his secret African American girlfriend Alma Sams, who he dated before marrying Jackie's grandmother, Mary Takaya. Half-a-century after Curtis's corpse is discovered in the freezer of Frank Sakai's corner store in the Crenshaw neighborhood of LA, Jackie Ishida eventually discovers the truth of the LA Police Department's brutality during those riots, and the interracial antagonism that reverberated out from this violence. The eye-witness testimony Jackie assembles is intricately tied to her identity and that of her investigative partner, James. These identities blur the clear-cut racial lines that the laws of segregation and anti-miscegenation drew to separate Asian Americans and African Americans.

The plot of *Southland* unfolds recursively; to iron out the unexpected twists and turns of Jackie and James's investigation, a brief summary of the novel is in order.

Southland begins with what seems to be the ending: Frank Sakai's funeral, at which his granddaughter Jackie Ishida is surprised to find so many unfamiliar African American attendees, people she never met while Frank was alive. Noting Curtis's name on Frank's will as the inheritor of his corner store on Bryant Street, and unable to place Curtis, Jackie contacts one of the black mourners, Loda Thomas, after the funeral, who then connects her with James Lanier, one of Curtis's cousins. Jackie first meets James at the Marcus Garvey Community Center in Central LA. Waiting to see James in the Center's lobby, Jackie feels as out of place as "an overseas visitor, scared and clutching her passport" (56). This sense of foreignness in a neighborhood where her grandfather once lived brings the investigation of the locked room mystery to an uncomfortably intimate personal level for our detective. Who is Jackie Ishida? Why does she feel so conflicted about her identity? These questions emerge at each step of our detective's deductive process.

Together with James, Jackie travels up and down the West Coast, traversing dangerous neighborhoods and cloistered rooms to find out who killed Curtis. Rumor has it that the killer was Nick Lawson, a white policeman and known racist who was notorious for harassing black kids around the blocks in Crenshaw. But one clue after another points the detectives down a different path: the trail eventually guides Jackie and James to the retired black police officer, Oliver Paxton. Through their investigation of Paxton, they determine that officer Robert Thomas is the true culprit who coerced Curtis—among four other boys who go by the names of Tony, David, Gerald, and Akira—into the freezer at the back of Frank's store.

Jackie's and James's investigation of Curtis's recalls the feeling of white anxiety in the "noir world" (Copjec 195), the feeling of uneasiness caused by border-crossing and interracial mixing. Their detective work frees from the black box of history the secret of Officer Thomas's abuse of power, and the violence he exercised on black bodies in the process of erecting borders between the black and Asian communities. In her seminal piece "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," Claire Jean Kim offers an explanation for why Officer Thomas's enforcement of racial stratification is beneficial to the US nation-state: it enables the management of minorities. As Kim argues, the relationships between blacks, Asians, and whites have always been relative to each other: far from being outside the black-white binary, Asian Americans are integral to it, valorized by "opinion makers" ("i.e. white elected officials, journalists, scholars, community leaders and business elites") "relative to blacks in cultural and racial grounds in order to dominate both groups" (107). Kim further specifies the order of domination that obtains between these groups, which she illustrates with a triangle where whites occupy the top racial position, Asians occupy the middle, and African-Americans the bottom. As the triangle has it, American society is structurally white. Under this order, African Americans are ostracized civically while Asian Americans are rendered unassimilable indefinitely. Kim's apparatus offers a pathway for understanding the racial separation that Officer Thomas enacts in *Southland* as a relation consisting of three "racial positions" (106) rather than three races.

What Kim means by the term racial position is that people are encultured into a racial position regardless of the race that they are born with. Racial position is a

productive concept for interpreting the criminal motives and detective biases in *Southland* because the novel portrays nascent moments of color blindness where characters like Thomas and Jackie act incongruently from the expectations of their community. Since the novel's mystery hides in the cracks of dissonance and interracial rifts, confronting these forces is a paramount task in recovering truths. In *Southland*, Jackie and James began to understand the operation of the racial order Kim describes in "Chapter 32: 1965, 1994" when they talk to Oliver Paxton.

As suggested by the double dates in the chapter's title, Revoyr intensifies the racial tension in Oliver's reminiscence of the crime scene in the format of *in medias res*. Scenes of the past blur into the present in a claustrophobia-inducing drama where race becomes a matter of life and death. Setting the stage for the racial tension on the day when the Watts Riot looting began is the opening sentence of Chapter 32 that describes the air pressure as "Louisiana-thick" (302). That scene started with Curtis and his four companions (all except one ended up dying inside Frank's freezer) congregating in front of Frank's corner store to defend it from vandalizers. Their gathering eventually raised the suspicion of Officer Lawson, who harassed them, asking them "I don't see why you boys have to act like this [...] Burning things. Stealing things" (310) talking to them as if they are part of the looters. Just as Curtis was bracing himself from Lawson's punch when his abuse escalated from verbal to physical, Lawson was held back by his partner Westphal who heard from the walkie-talkie that the police force "needs them over on Crenshaw" (311).

But the prosecution of the innocent continues. Replacing Lawson is the African American policeman officer Thomas, who thinks and speaks like his white counterpart when he interrogates Curtis: “All you hoodlums on the street, you’re destroying your own neighborhood. I don’t see white people out there on Crenshaw or Central. It is you” (313). Thomas’s self-loathing in this diatribe against the boys is an example of the pathological assimilation that Franz Fanon describes in *Black Skin White Masks*. Acting as if he is suffering from an introjected white superego, Thomas hates himself and his kind, a sentiment that becomes apparent when he tells Curtis: “It’s niggers like you who give the rest of us a bad name” (312). The high temperature of the enclosed shop contributes to the heat of this exchange, with “the closed doors and windows making the old store feel like some medium circle of hell” (313). Fired by the heat of the room and by his racial self-loathing, Thomas’s hate speech quickly veers into violence. Seeing that Thomas is growing more volatile and walking closer to him, Curtis began to sweat. Telling the boys that he’s going to “cool [them] off” (313), Thomas corrals them into the freezer. While the Japanese Teen Akira escapes through the back door, Thomas holds the rest at gun point. One after another, the four black boys step across the threshold of the freezer, until “the door” behind them “shut with a sucking sound” (314).

The next time the boys emerge from the freezer, they are dead. When Frank discovers their frozen corpses out, their eyelashes have already gathered frost. In the aftermath of that incident, speculations mount as to the identity of the murderer; some says it is Frank. To put these rumors behind them and to escape the trauma of the Watts Riot, the Sakai family quickly moves to Gardena. Frank’s store metaphorizes the history

of interracial relations in the second half of the twentieth century. The store began as a place of interracial confluence, but Thomas's murder of Curtis turns Frank's store into a closet in which the history of interracial romance is sealed and the evidence of interracial violence is locked up, mirroring the strictly enforced boundary between the black neighborhood of Crenshaw and the more affluent district of Gardena (populated by mostly Japanese Americans now) that emerged post Watts. When contextualized in the longer racial history of LA, Thomas's confinement of Curtis and others is emblematic of the moment when the threat of police violence turned Crenshaw into a ghetto to better contain both the LA city border and pure racial identities. Alongside the violent subjugation of the neighborhood's resident came the destruction of organic relations between interracial subjects.

Law enforcement, as represented by Thomas in the scene, plays a significant role in the policing of identity and spatial borders that structure the three racial positions involved in the relative valorization of Asians. Frank Sakai's corner store used to be an unmarked space in which blacks and Asians collaborated: it was a property with a genealogy of interracial charity that goes all the way back to Old Man Larabie (a black man), from whom Frank obtained the store, which is about to be gifted to Curtis. Police brutality cut that legacy short by demarcating the store as a site of crime, cleaving the African American community from the Japanese American community, and leaving the Crenshaw district more segregated than ever. According to novel's prologue, which reads like an ode to Crenshaw's past, it says "no one" "including the children of the people who lived there" thinks of the neighborhood now that "the rest of the city dismisses it as

a ghetto” (12). Officer Thomas’s racist assumptions contribute to this cultural amnesia: his mental map of LA’s geography and boundaries literally polices the limits of how far racial groups can go.

Through the work of the black Officer Thomas, whiteness consolidates its rule over racial minorities by pitting Asian Americans against African Americans while managing to completely erase itself from the crime scene. Certainly, Officer Thomas has no sense of his facilitation of the operation of white supremacy. When confronted with his crime, he refuses to acknowledge his wrongdoing, insisting that what he did was a favor to the city. He coldly tells Jackie and James: “not that it breaks my heart. At least it got them off from the streets. Probably saved everyone a lot of trouble in the long run” (330). What Office Thomas codes as “trouble” is, of course, the energy and vitality of African American life subjugated and contained by white supremacy. And, as the prologue of the novel demonstrates, this racial violence, and the racial hierarchies it enforces, persist across the generations, and register twenty years after the murders in the symptoms of identity crisis and anti-blackness that Jackie has exhibited.

In the novel’s beginning, Jackie sees Crenshaw as a dangerous place of questionable value. “She’d only driven through it by mistake mostly, and once or twice on purpose when she was trying to avoid the traffic on the freeway”; to her, “[Crenshaw] is very much a black ghetto” (20). Jackie’s stigmatization of Crenshaw is a legacy of racial segregation as facilitated by the racial triangle that took root in LA even before she was born, to which she was oblivious until Frank’s funeral, where she found herself to be unable to “properly grieve” his death (30). The distant relations between Jackie and Frank

are further compounded by her family's habit of keeping things quiet. When she explains to James why taboos—like her homosexuality, her family's internment history, and Curtis's death in Frank's store—stayed stagnant like a skeleton in the closet, she complained that “no one talked” in the family, “more than gaps in the narrative there was no narrative” (65). These narrative voids become hurdles for Jackie that inhibit her from finding a sense of cultural belonging with the Sakais, and more fundamentally to her heritage identity.

Revoyr positions racial displacement as the force that reduces Jackie into whiteness. As the third person narrator conveys, “[Jackie's] life had been flat and textureless as a starched white sheet. And while she'd always considered herself lucky to be so blessed, now she felt that she was somehow not real” (146). Her relationship with her grandfather is equally unreal. To establish a reality in that relation, albeit posthumously, Jackie began to look for evidence that explains the connection between Curtis and her grandfather, a process that ends up reconnecting her to her ancestors' history in Crenshaw.

Jackie's investigation allows her to retrieve from the locked rooms of the past the truth of Curtis's mixed-race parentage. This genealogy contains a network of interracial relations between Asians and blacks that Copjec would call “real.” These relations are “real” in the sense that they are unexpected by and unaccounted for by the symbolic order that is the American law (before the year of 1965 which marked the end of all exclusionary and anti-miscegenation laws) and the mainstream culture (which replaced racist laws in stratifying people on the basis of ethnicity after 1965). These “real”

relations blurred the lines drawn by the white hetero-patriarchy in demarcating each race's position in relation to others for the securitization of whiteness. The network Jackie uncovers is interracial and reflects a reality that appeared before the segregation that emerged in the aftermath of the Watts riots. Jackie traces a network of interracial relations that begins in 1939 when Frank's parents first moved to Angeles Mesa from Little Tokyo. From Frank's perspective, Mesa was as a multicultural landscape where meaningful relations developed between Asian American and African Americans that were not possible elsewhere. Young Frank found his mixed-race community through varsity football at Dorsey High; there, "Frank was happy." "The laughter, the game, the camaraderie—but even more than that, the breeze, the grass, the palm trees, and the rabbits—were why he'd stayed home [rather than going into the city] that day" (95). Despite his friends in the city calling him a country boy, Frank feels that "Angeles Mesa is where he belongs" (96). The feeling of home that Frank found in the community is conditioned by interracial camaraderie, a type of fraternity that is rare in the rest of LA, where segregation laws are closely observed. Frank encounters an example of this segregation during a trip to the Santa Monica beach. At the entrance to the beach, Frank and his two black friends from the football team, Barry and Victor, are confronted with two arrows, one pointing to the beach on the left and reading "whites only," and the other reading "colored only" and pointing to the beach on the right. Unfamiliar as Frank is with the concept of segregation, it takes him a while to choose a side. Frank of *Southland* occupies what Leslie Bow—author of a study on the Asian American identity in the South before the Civil Rights Movement—would call an "interstitial space" (qtd in Huh

187) that is not white and not black. Frank's decision to eventually take a deep breath and run to the right, the "colored" side, yelling at Barry and Victor at the top of his lungs: "last one to the water has to walk home" (98) is the first instance of an agential articulation of America-ness by an Asian where Asian-American-ness is embodied by the choice of performing the opposite of the "duo gesture" (188) of assimilation that would otherwise be accomplished through identifying with whiteness and disavowing blackness.

Although the Mesas appeared to the youthful Frank as a space of almost utopian diversity that allows for the easy formation of transracial relations, the community's anti-miscegenation law still had its cultural hold on people's mindset, especially in regard to interracial romance. Given the role of the law in Frank's sense of his community, it is worth noting that only two states—Maryland and Oklahoma—legally banned intermarriage between Africans and Asians before *Loving Vs. Virginia* which ruled anti-miscegenation law unconstitutional in 1967 (Chin and Martyn). But as pointed out by critics like Susan Koshy in her analysis of Chinese residents of Mississippi, segregation between blacks and Asians occurred implicitly, and was reinforced culturally. Most Asians identified as white and went to great lengths to prove it in order to obtain better access to resources during segregation (Koshy 173-183). "Chapter 29: 1945" in *Southland* shows how social taboo forced the relationship between the Japanese-American Frank and the African-American Alma to remain secret. When they encountered each other on the street by day, the lovers had to pretend to be strangers, exchanging hellos like casual acquaintances. At night, the store became their private

locked room—a refuge where the interpellative force of the anti-miscegenation law was held abeyance.

Every day after the store owner Old Man Larabie went home, the young Frank would stay late at the back room, pretending to be busy with work, while in actuality, he was waiting for Alma to come in through the back alley. Sheltered by the darkness of the night, and protected by the sanctuary of the store, Frank and Alma would caress each other and cuddle; they each found in one other the enfolding, protective comfort that they could not find elsewhere. Alma is Frank's cocoon: "when [her thighs and calves] were wrapped around him, he felt enclaved, contained" (280). "Containment" connotes positively here, characterizing the feeling of contentment that Frank found in Alma—a type of nourishment rather than suffocation. In Alma's embrace, Frank felt that "she took him in, contained him without giving away" (282). As for Alma, Frank is her foundation: "gravity and fortitude—not a forced, oppressive silence but a man who did not air his grief" (283). Alma sensed in Frank a strange familiarity: "[he] was her brother, also—another soldier, a man of color. His skin was brown but of a different shade—wet sand, and not the earth" (283). Recurring in these intimate descriptions of the appeal that Frank and Alma find in each other are the images related to the ocean: the "tidal wave" which Frank likens to Alma's embrace, and the "wet sand" that Alma compares to Frank's complexion. These images can be read as indications of the nexus of Afro-Asian networks that map nicely onto Copjec's version of the "real," which the theorist distinctively categorizes as "oceanic," undifferentiated by "formal differences" (175). Revoyr's specific deployment of oceanic imagery to portray Frank and Alma's interracial

relation in the period of “open racial triangulation” allows the couple’s romance and the store that shelters their intimacy to be read as part of the “real,” unfettered by the symbolic order of American law. But the liberated status of Frank and Alma’s romance and space did not last long: when Alma finds out that she is pregnant with Frank’s baby (a mixed race identity that is seen as illegitimate by the law before *Loving Vs. Virginia*), she moves to Northern California, and marries the light-skin Bruce Henry Martindale. Though she later returns to Crenshaw, her relationship with Frank is never the same. The same can be said about Frank’s corner store, which was once a bridge that connects racial differences; but, once encroached upon by law enforcement, it is used as a place by the law (via Lawson and Thomas) to assert its sovereignty and becomes a spectacle that signifies to those who walk by it the importance of drawing proper racial and neighborhood boundaries.

The preciousness of this space for Frank and Alma makes its violation by the force of law all the more tragic. Officer Thomas’s violence turns Frank’s store into a space that inspires awe and fear that separates racial groups. Jackie and James’s retroactive effort to bring justice to his case overturns the segregating effect of Curtis’s death in Crenshaw. The duo’s discovery of Curtis’s Afro-Asian identity and the network of relationships connected to it leads to the unveiling of Frank and Alma’s interracial intimacy, which demonstrates the existence of more harmonious forms of co-existence in Crenshaw that existed before the emergence of the coded phase of racial triangulation in 1970 when the white nation-state began to replace race with class as an explanation for why African Americans stayed in Crenshaw while Asians moved out of it.

This discovery has a direct influence on Jackie's sense of herself as a racial subject: the investigation into her grandfather's secret history has made her racial identity "more real," less mediated by whiteness that eroded on her racial consciousness (87). Jackie's redemption of her racial identity also forces her to confront the full reality of the homosexuality that she has partially hidden in the locked room of the closet. By the end of the novel, she reports that something "ancient and glacial" (343) has shifted inside her: that shift, as Revoyr represents it, is a deeper sense of self-acceptance that is reflected in her choice of girlfriend. Early in the novel, Jackie finds an Asian girl's facial features repulsive, and thus opts to date Laura, a white woman who works for a city council member who is too afraid to speak out for the Thai garment workers making headlines in LA due to their exploitation by their employers. By the novel's end, Jackie openly attends her law school's "Air Out Your Closet Party" with Rebecca, a mixed race Asian-white woman who works for a non-profit firm that fights for the rights of Thai garment workers to stay in the US. Jackie's pursuit of racial justice for Curtis profoundly shapes her sense of racial and sexual identity.

Another personal gain of Jackie's investigation is a deeper sense of familial kinship. Curtis, as she learns, was her uncle. Jackie's investigation reclaims for Curtis's living relations the truth of his Asian heritage, a relation that was intentionally hidden by his mother Alma due to her fear of anti-miscegenation taboos. Once Jackie and James learn of Curtis's Asian-ness, they drive to Oakland to talk to Alma's sister Sophia, from whom they discover that Alma, while pregnant with Frank's baby, left for San Francisco and married Bruce Martindale, a light skinned African American man (who Curtis

believed was his father). In addition to rediscovering a long-lost uncle, Jackie also forms a kinship relation with James. Still reeling from the shock of their discovery that Curtis's death was the result of black-on-black crime via Oliver, James and Jackie are at a loss for words. Unable to speak, they find solace in each other's bodies. Sobbing, James leans into Jackie's shoulder for support. When they become closer, James's face pushes up against that of Jackie's; James then begins to kiss Jackie, and she responds by "grasping and caressing" his "shoulders and back" (317). "They kissed [...] trying desperately to leave themselves behind" (317). But then gradually, James pulls himself back, and apologizes to Jackie. As the narrator observes,

[s]omething was wrong, they both knew it, but it wasn't simply that Lanier was a man; that Jackie desired women. She knew that she'd never be in this situation, feel so open and connected, with any man but Lanier, but it was also the fact that it was Lanier that kept it from going further. And he knew he didn't want this as much as he did. Not because of the limits and idiosyncrasies of desire, but because, they both realized, with a clarity that shocked them, they were, at least in some sense family. (317)

What is felt but not spoken of here is the anxiety around the taboo of incest that James and Jackie's intimacy borders on. However, the emphasis here should be on the hedging phrase—"in some sense"—because the discovery that Frank is Curtis's father shifts their understanding of their kinship relations: Jackie is revealed to be Curtis's niece by blood, and James (who took Curtis as his cousin from the Martindale's side) is in fact unrelated to him by blood at all. The pall of incest—and Jackie's own queerness—prevents her relationship with Frank from developing further toward romance. Still, their closeness continues along a different path, towards a non-biological, non-sexual kinship. The bond between them bypasses the patriarchal logic of heterosexual coupling for it is queerly

expressed in and beyond romantic terms, which further renders their partnership as an intimacy resulting from a co-investment in racial justice.

The political philosopher Michael Sandel would further add that Jackie and James's partnership is the sort of relation on which "enlarged affections" are grounded (169). In Sandel's seminal work *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, he worries that deontological systems like the criminal justice system that are conceived by lofty ideals like morality have a tendency to lose touch with people. As Sandel rationalizes, on the one hand, there is no denying that justice "is the virtue that embodies deontology's liberating vision and allows it to unfold" (177); on the other hand, as Sandel continues, "the deontological vision is flawed" because "a deontological self" is "stripped of all possible constitutive attachments, less liberated than disempowered" (177). In other words, for a just society to take place, framing the ideal of justice in terms of abstract principles alone is not enough, because the plain wording of legal statutes often fails to take individual character and actual circumstances into consideration; what Sandel proposes is a supplementation of the law with an emotional logic governed by private feelings like friendship. On the subject of friendship, he professes,

the possibility of character in the constitutive sense is also indispensable to a certain kind of friendship, a friendship marked by mutual insight as well as sentiment. By any account, friendship is bound up with certain feelings. We like our friends, and wish them well. We hope that their desires find satisfaction, and that their plans meet with success, and we commit ourselves in various ways to advancing their ends. (180)

When Sandel elaborates on how friendship can be turned into "enlarged affections" (169) that will orbit the public around the idea of justice, he asserts that public friendship requires participating citizens to know their own identity history, and also that of their

friends. And it is only within such structure of public kinship that actions of justice can be undertaken in a manner that advances the benefit of everyone.

The friendship between Jackie and James models public kinship: as they bring to light the messiness of Asian and African American cross-racial relations long masked by the laws of segregation, they deepen each other's knowledge about a shared racial past in Crenshaw, which serves a basis for a wider interracial coalition to flourish. The ending of *Southland* demonstrates as much: Lois (Frank's daughter and heiress) donates Curtis's share of her inheritance from selling the corner store in Crenshaw to James's Marcus Garvey Community Center. This act of philanthropy establishes an Afro-Asian legacy in Curtis's name.

If the noir is a parable of nation-building as critical genre studies argues, then Revoyr's revision of the genre with detectives of color in *Southland* is a narrative of critique that comments on the soft devices of border construction and policing in the US that separates races. As Jackie and James open the door of the locked room by breaking the silence of the hidden history behind Frank's corner store, they go some way toward righting past wrongs, and push back against the forces that segregated Asian Americans and African Americans in LA.

The detectives of colors' persistence in conducting their investigation into Curtis's death shows that investigating the complexities of historical racial injustices can become a catalyst for racial coalition formation. Jackie and James's investigation unearths a political temporality of Afro-Asian co-existence that existed in defiance of the racial triangulation of the law and its concomitant social taboos. Jackie's analysis reveals

that the pre-Civil-Rights generation set a precedent for transracial alliance for the post-Civil-Rights generation to reference; that network was literally and metaphorically represented by the corner store, a contact zone that, at first, seems to have escaped the racial stratifying efforts of the US nation-state. However, as the narrator divulges in retrospect, what caused the Watts Riot to erupt was not “the hunger” or “the lack of jobs” in Central LA but “the sense that people are being watched” by “police” that posed and “acted like an army” (216). In aftermath of the Watts riots, and the racial capitalist violence and internecine conflict they spawned, Frank’s corner store and the in-between-networks were rolled back. James and Jackie’s relentless search for racial justice recovers (for those outside the Watts community) the histories of interracial conflict and conviviality, saving their Afro-Asian relations and histories from turning into relics.

Though the charges against Officer Thomas are still pending by the end of the novel, Jackie and James have brought the case to the office of a district attorney who seems determined to achieve a form of racial justice that will make reparations for Officer Thomas’s violent acts. Racial justice—a process that redistributes justice across racial lives whose value had been attributed unevenly by the US nation-state—can change legal ground, because of the “stare decisis system” in the American law where recent evidence is actually treated by the legal system as more reliable to act as the authority for making reparation. Along that vein, with each piece of evidence that Jackie and James procure from Frank’s corner store in Crenshaw, the detective duo acquire new clues that shift perspectives on who the murderer and victim are. This trans-

temporal pattern is the associative logic of the historical narrative of racial justice, in which each episode, though far-flung, are connected by mutually constitutive relations.

The resolution of the mysteries in *Southland* reveals the inseparability between the lives of the Ishidas, Takayas, Sams, and Martindales. When these relations are released from the locked rooms of the past, they destabilize white sovereignty and challenge its schemes of border policing. But what Revoyr intends to achieve with *Southland* is far from the easy catharsis of completion. It is true that Jackie and James's detective work over the course of the novel has pieced together fragments of their families' transracial kinship, which also testifies to the law and law enforcement's violence in restricting access to spaces of interracial relation-making, in cordoning off mixed-race bodies, and in stigmatizing interracial relationships. But the brutality of Curtis's death can't be overturned, a fact that Revoyr reminds us of by concluding with a flashback that brings us back to 1965, a moment when Curtis is hurrying to Frank's store to protect it from "some fool" who may try "to burn it down" (348). Curtis is the first among the other four boys to "jog down to the store." Running, he hopes that Frank "would be proud of him" and he "wonder[s] what [Frank] has been planning to tell him" the last time as they parted in a hurry to take shelter from the looming looters (348). With the knowledge that these are the last moments of Curtis's life, we as readers feel abject on his behalf in the face of his imminent death. This is Revoyr's aim. She wants to leave us with the painful knowledge of what Curtis lost, and to complicate the happy ending in chapter 36 where Jackie comes to accept her wholesome identity as a Japanese American lesbian. The only corrective to the case of Curtis is to overcome police brutality in

particular, and racial inequality in general. As *Southland* suggests, this effort involves the tracing out and contributing to the progress of racial justice and forms of cross-racial kinship that have historically been occluded.

Ed Lin's *Snakes Can't Run*

Ed Lin's *Snakes Can't Run* (2010), the second installment in his Robert Chow trilogy, is another noir fiction that comments on racial injustice in the law and law enforcement. Unlike *Southland*, in which private detectives of color unearth long-buried corruption within the police department, *Snakes* critiques the 5th Precinct of the NY Police Department from inside the department while also examining the systemic violence perpetrated by members of immigrant communities against each other, and inflamed by the police department. Written in consultation with two retired NYPD detectives—Yu Sing Yee and Thomas Ong—and told from perspective of Robert Chow, a Chinese American officer recently promoted to the detective track, *Snakes* situates its story within NYC's Chinatown in 1967, at the moment when the US's diplomacy with the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and the KMT (Kuomintang) was about to change due to the death of Mao Zedong. As with *Southland*, the concept of the locked room is central to the plot of *Snakes*, though in Lin's novel, the concept operates more broadly; the "rooms" that Robert Chow's investigation unlock include spaces of confinement of different sizes and scales, from the room that holds a group of undocumented immigrants, to the small chest that hides the records of Robert's father's illegal dealings, to NYC's Chinatown writ large. Robert's entrance into these various rooms exposes whiteness's management of anxiety about the racial other via a range of strategies of geopolitical

containment. *Snakes* also presents a kaleidoscopic image of NYC's Chinatown as a homogenous locale comprised of heterogeneous living experiences, including those of communist Chinese, Taiwanese, Fukienese, Cantonese, and Chinese American residents.

Snakes begins with murder. Two Asian men in their twenties are found dead of gunshot wounds on the streets of NYC Chinatown, their hands tied behind them with wire. The 5th Precinct has a hunch that the murder was committed by "snakeheads," human traffickers who bring illegal immigrants into the country. "English" Sanchez, a Hispanic officer in the precinct, points out that the increased crowding of the neighborhood, along with the rise in bank transfers suggest that smuggling activity is on the rise (83). In spite of these indicators, the precinct decides not to pursue the human traffickers due to bureaucratic reasons that I will explain below.

Defying orders of his superiors, Robert Chow decides to take matters into his own hands, because he sees it as a chance "to do something for [his estranged and deceased] father" who labored his life away to pay his immigration debts to snakeheads. Robert sniffs around the streets, the restaurants, and the shops in Chinatown for clues to the identities of the human traffickers. From some distraught looking Fukienese men he meet at his friend's toy store, he discovers that the two dead men were trafficked into the US by a man who goes by the moniker of "Brother Five." According to these Fukienese individuals, who were smuggled into the country with the two men before they died, "Brother Five" is the murderer—they witnessed the victims being "taken away from the safe house" after they refuse to pay the rising coyote fee—the sum trafficker's demand from their customers for their services (50).

Reflecting on this clue, it hits Robert that the pronunciation of “Five” in Mandarin—*wu*—is the same as “Wu”—as in the last name 伍 in Mandarin, a link that points his speculation in the direction of Mr. Ng, a widely known successful import-export businessman in Chinatown from Singapore who goes by the Cantonese transliteration of 伍—“Ng”—as opposed to the Mandarin one. Robert’s theory is quickly dismissed by Mr. Ng’s sister, Winnie, who tells Robert that they don’t have five siblings, seemingly voiding the meaning of “Brother Five’s” full name. Just as Robert is about to abandon this line of inquiry, it is revived by Eddie Ding—a police officer recruited by Manhattan South from the San Francisco Police Department to collect evidence to indict Mr. Ng for tax evasion. Eddie, a master’s degree holder in Chinese Studies, points out to Robert that “five” could actually mean “a nickname from outside the triad” (253), because four represents the four “directions” and “oceans” that made up of the triad world. Given the subcultural connotation of five (五) in Chinese, “Brother Five” is naturally an apt moniker for a philanthropic businessman who runs an underground illegal operation like Mr. Ng.

Robert’s hunch about Mr. Ng is ultimately affirmed in a complex scene in which the commotion of Eddie’s raid on the prosperous businessman’s community center rattles the undocumented immigrants that Ng has hidden in the basement of a funeral home that stands between the community center and Robert’s friend Don’s apartment. Hearing the clamor of the immigrants Don—who is suffering from PTSD after returning from Vietnam—mistakes the murmuring of the sequestered immigrants as the voices of the “men” sent by his father “through the walls to take [him] away” (193). Out of self-

defense, Don strikes one of his apartment walls with a sledgehammer with Robert as his witness; the detective had stopped by the apartment out of concern for the effect of Eddie's raiding operation on his vulnerable friend. Robert initially assumes that Don's violent reaction is merely a PTSD episode, so he is astonished when he peeks through the wall and discovers "fifteen smelly men" inside the basement of the parlor (267). "With his unkempt hair, glasses, wide nose and miserable expression," one of the men tells Robert in Mandarin that "we are victims [...] they make us move from city to city every few months" (267). When asked the identity of their traffickers, the man says that it is the snakehead who goes by the name of "Brother Five" (267), confirming Robert's suspicion of Mr. Ng. Catching wind of Eddie's raid, the prosperous businessman tries to flee his office, but he is caught and shot by Robert.

The capture of Mr. Ng might seem like a natural endpoint for the narrative, but Lin is far more interested in critiquing systemic corruption than in merely depicting the drama of a lone perpetrator's apprehension by the police. In "Chapter 27," the novel turns its focus from Robert's investigation of Ng to his dawning recognition of the ways his department flouts the law. As Robert discovers, his department condones illegal immigration: Mr. Ng eventually goes unindicted for human smuggling but is shot dead by an unknown assailant's gun while he had been recovering from Robert's gunshot in the hospital.

The "locked box" (278) of articles that Eddie sent to Robert from San Francisco shows that his father was more than merely a victim of human traffickers. The box includes accounting records that were unmistakably written by his father, which detail the

paper names of undocumented immigrants he brought into the country, and the interest they paid him for his coyote fee in “weekly increments of five to ten dollars” (279). This grim legacy forces Robert to reckon with a dark chapter of his family history that his mother actively hid from him. The locked box that contains the proof of his father’s crimes is like a miniaturized version of a locked room—it represents in concrete terms the layers of deceit and corruption that characterize the business of human trafficking. More specifically, the “locked box” links the larger legal, socio-economic powers Robert is investigating to his parentage, complicating his sense of his identity, and forcing him to see himself as an indirect beneficiary of and disciplinarian against human trafficking.

The paradoxical nature of the locked room and its corpse in Copjec’s explanation is instrumental in opening up the critique of the law and law enforcement as signifying systems in *Snakes*. Just as the locked room is demarcated by the symbolic order of the law, Chinatown is maintained by the 5th Precinct, a unit that is invested with the regulative power of the whiteness of the nation-state. And, as in confirmation of the way “the real” can intrude upon and disrupt the symbolic order—as in the corpse which tumbled out of a car in the Ford factory in Copjec’s illustration—the corpses disposed of on the streets of Chinatown by human traffickers force the authorities to confront the entangled layers of capitalist violence that operate behind Chinatown’s façade, and extend out of it across the nation and the globe. The law, of course, has little interest in these bodies; consequently, Robert’s precinct expects a quick and perfunctory conclusion of the investigation into their appearance, because the precinct knows well that its job isn’t to rid Chinatown of crime, but to conserve the enclave as a space of relegation

where crimes are ignored, thus enabling the persistence of all the illegal activity in Chinatown that does not rise to the level of homicide and the appearance of lawfulness in more prosperous white environs. This contradictory and corrupt mission depends upon the precinct's collaboration with a select few chosen from the racial group. Robert Chow is one of chosen ones; however, as the novel unfolds, he begins to lose trust in the system that selected him.

After the discovery of the two corpses, Robert is eager to get “the Immigration and Naturalization Service” involved in “round[ing] up the illegals” (84) and “stop” the sweatshop “exploitation” in Chinatown (84), but English— Robert’s aforementioned colleague in the precinct—says “we tried that before. The Greater China Association threatened to file a racial discrimination lawsuit if we start raiding restaurants with the INS” (84). As he goes onto say, “not only would the association come down on us, but also the ACLU, not to mention the fucking Manhattan D.A.!” (84). Seen from such perspective, Robert and the rest of the 5th Precinct, are ciphers, or even dummies, that the forces of law and order hold up as an example to prove that they have extended protection to Chinatown. Suffering under this systemically corrupt system are the Chinese immigrants (both the legal and the illegal) who are swindled in their immigration process and then pitted against each other in the capitalist market for low paying jobs in Chinatown.

The way justice is subverted by capital is further illustrated by Robert’s conversations with Eddie and his boss, Sean Ahern, who is referred to by the moniker the Brow in the Precinct (because of his distinctive “short reddish-brown hair” above his

eyes), at different points of the investigation concerning Mr. Ng. Eddie spells out the how capitalist motives condition the workings of every layer of the system of justice as he explains to Robert why the department would prefer to indict Ng for tax evasion instead of murder:

This case is going to make the government a shitload of money—probably tens of millions of dollars! New York City’s going to get its share. The Feds are gonna get their share. We don’t need to put this guy in the slammer as much we need his money. There’s no big payoff to catching a murderer. But a tax evader? You hit the jackpot! (256)

Some justice is worthier to pursue than others, and some justice is easier to pursue. In this case, a verdict that promises a financial payout is more appealing to the department than a verdict that achieves racial justice. Profits, including the profits that the department might obtain by pursuing certain cases, and the profits that accrue when ignoring the activities of certain criminals, determine the workings of the 5th Precinct in *Snakes*. In fact, the precinct doesn’t catch all wrongdoing in Chinatown because the profit-oriented legal system needs undocumented immigrants to bear the brunt of cheap and hard labor in NYC’s Chinatown.

The comparative irrelevance of racial justice in relation to profit is thrown into relief in chapter 27 when the boss at the 5th Precinct, The Brow, reprimands Robert. That scene which is the second to the last of the book is frustrating to read. Instead of praising Robert for releasing the illegal immigrants from unsanitary conditions, and for maiming Ng in the arm as the criminal was trying to flee from the smuggling operation, the Brow rebukes him. “Shooting an unarmed man! [...] Have you completely lost your already-

feeble mind, Officer Chow! If you are indicted, you'll have to hire your own defense lawyer! The department won't stand for a dissolute character!" (272).

But it is law enforcement, not Robert, that is "dissolute." The 5th Precinct in *Snakes* lacks a moral compass. The very existence of the fifteen disheveled Chinese men Robert uncovers demonstrates the inadequacy of the 5th Precinct's efforts to stop human trafficking. Having exposed the precinct's lack of oversight, Robert is treated by his superintendent as a criminal for his pursuit of racial justice. What Robert runs up against is racism and classism in the American legal system: his curiosity procures from the locked room one piece of evidence after another that divulges the American law's strategic distribution of citizenship across good and bad immigrants in consolidation of a border that would fend off threats of the poor while facilitating and profiting from the flow of local and transnational capital. Robert's curiosity also makes him abject as a police officer of color. On the one hand, he desires to bring criminals to justice, which he does over the course of *Snakes*; but, as The Brow's treatment of Ng's indictment of Robert has shown, Robert has to act complicit in the capitalistic criminal justice system of NYC Chinatown in order to be counted as part of that system. Instead of rewarding Robert and acknowledging him for his dogged investigation into human trafficking, the precinct punishes Robert. Rather than charging Mr. Ng for "conspiracy to smuggle aliens," the precinct ignores his crime. And as the narrator further reports, just as when the trafficker is recovering in the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital for his gunshot wound, some "unknown assailants" shot him "and two armed guards to death" (273). The continuing racial injustice in the precinct and NYC's Chinatown leaves readers

wondering whether Robert—an Asian American policeman—is ever going to be accepted by his institution and the larger Chinese community around it and gain that sense of belonging to this country that he always wanted after returning from the war in Vietnam.

The last page of the novel offers us a clue. In a scene unfolding shortly after the death of Mao Zedong, Robert is presented as a lonesome figure journeying through the “pro-KMT” and “pro-Communist” sections of Chinatown. Untouched by excitement or sorrow at Mao’s death, he “get[s] to the place that [he] calls home” (285). The location of his apartment is of significance: it is located at the “southeast corner of Seward Park,” “a Jewish neighborhood mixed in with Spanish-speaking immigrants” (17). The fact that it lies just at the perimeter of Chinatown, in a at a transracial third spot is symbolic of the non-essentialist position which Robert finally takes toward his identity.

Robert’s eventual collaboration with his African American colleague Vandyne sheds lights on the mystery of the protagonist’s subjectivity and subject position. If *Southland* argues that the retroactive pursuit of justice is a performative that can motivate Afro Asian collaboration; *Snakes* specifies that pursuit to be a task of safeguarding justice for immigrants and veterans of color. These aims may seem to be unrelated, but they eventually converge in Robert’s investigative process.

For instance, post-traumatic stress syndromes interrupt each of these veterans from their investigation at different points. The stress of police work along with more quotidian noise and violence triggers their symptoms, which include macabre visions like smoke, fire, corpses, coffins, ghosts of children emerging from trees, and people talking behind walls. Yet this very last vision, which Robert first interprets as a paranoid

hallucination, leads to the confirmation of Mr. Ng's role as the human trafficker, "Brother Five."

Indeed, in *Snakes' Chinatowns*, the secrets hidden behind locked doors are related to transnational subjects rather than transracial ones as they are in *Southland*. Also in contrast to *Southland*, where the forces of American law and justice seek to dismantle and cover over liminal identities, *Snakes'* portrait of Robert Chow depicts a liminal subject who is, at least initially, prized by law enforcement because of his apparent willingness to collaborate with hegemonic institutions like the legal sphere and global capitalism.

Robert Chow is nominally a policeman, but he is mostly given "photo-op assignments" (104), implying that his presence in the precinct is not of equal importance to law and order as those of his colleagues. Yet Lin also establishes that Robert's position invests him with a treacherous type of agency, which allows him to exercise and harness the regulatory and interpellative power of the American law for the negotiation of racial justice in a multiethnic, multiracial space like NYC, at least so long as his enforcement does not run afoul of his superiors in the precinct. In her monograph *An Ethics of Betrayal* (2009), Crystal Parikh troubles the possibilities inherent in alterity created by acts of collaboration between racial minorities. She says that "politics of betrayal that fall short of idealized minorities solidarities can render an ethical vision of the possible alliances and futures embedded within but obscured by [the expectations] of that politics" (2017; 2). Robert's choice to become a police officer in Chinatown, which is occupation that puts him at risk of being called a turn-coat by other Chinese people, is precisely an

enactment of the ethics of treachery with which he strived to achieve a higher level of racial justice. That treacherous dimension of Robert's position is worth lingering on.

As Lan Duong, who also writes on the subject of betrayal in the context of Asian American Studies, has pointed out, the word "treacherous" has a diagnostic function in addition to its negative connotation: it refers to a difficult position that a collaborator is stuck in. Duong specifies that a racial subject's collaboration with imperial/colonial powers shows "a conservation of the authorial subject himself" (77), whose unpredictability enacts a "decentering of authority" (79). Left behind are traces of "disparities of power" between individuals and larger systems (79). But what is Robert Chow conserving? For what subject position is he saving himself by collaborating with law enforcement, a governmental unit that has a long history of bias against people of color? The answer is that Robert is collaborating in order to conserve the opportunity for the pursuit of racial justice. The phrase "racial justice" (264) is mentioned only once in *Snakes* during a passing joke between Robert and Vandyne about their experience of being baited by the integrity test from the Internal Affairs Office. But, that scene establishes the duo's position in the precinct as that which is within but not of the law enforcement.

In that scene, Vandyne recalls a time when he was ticketing a car in Chinatown. The car had its window open. In the front seat of the car was the book *Gone with the Wind*, sticking out of which was "a five-dollar bill" (264). Vandyne was about to take the book back to the precinct, but before doing so, he thought better of it. As he reminisces to Robert, "I stopped, I thought about what a racist book it was and that I didn't want to help

somebody who was getting their kicks reading it” (265). To that, Robert responds, “Of course, it was an integrity test [...] It’s a good thing you trusted your commitment to racial justice” (265). Racial justice as a moral arbiter here does not align with the Internal Affairs Office. If Vandyne had not wanted to keep the racism of Margaret Mitchell’s classic novel from circulating in his (racist) department, he would have taken the book along with the five dollar bill, and been implicated in the violation of ethical codes by the Internal Affairs Office. This quotidian exchange shared by detectives of color, along with details like the “unofficial and illegal mug books of Polaroid’s” (158) that the 5th curates to keep tabs on alleged suspects, de-couple racial justice from law enforcement to an extent. Although the whiteness inherent in the precinct has no interest in upholding racial justice, detectives of color in the law enforcement like Vandyne and Robert do. In racial justice, they remain inside and outside of the law and law and law enforcement, while also sketching out a nascent form of community that goes beyond the limits of official justice—a community that the political philosopher Michael Sandel argues “engages the identity as well as the interests of the participants” (181).

The relationship that Robert cultivates with Vandyne in *Snakes* is an exemplification of Sandel’s affective public network that extends justice for everyone. Throughout their investigative process, the men come to understand each other better, and to better understand themselves. Vandyne accompanies Robert in his independent investigation into Chinatown’s illegal immigrant network. They also keep each other in check from turning into a liability to the precinct: when Robert erupts as he talks about the snakeheads, vowing to “take the law into [his] own hands” (160), Vandyne warns him

“don’t do it! If you shoot them, you’re playing right into the criminal’s hands” because that creates easy ground for the criminals to instigate legal backlash against the police. As for Vandyne, he sees Robert as a “brother” (259); further still, Robert has Vandyne’s best interests at heart outside of work, too. When Vandyne’s marriage with Rose is on the brink of falling apart, Robert takes the initiative to offer them the much needed benefit of counseling that the couple has yet to receive from the Department of Veteran Affairs: Robert helps Rose to see things from Vandyne’s perspective, rationalizing Vandyne’s silence for her, explaining that there is “stuff from Nam that all of us [veterans] are still dealing with, and this job [in the Precinct] can be stressful as heck, too” (205).

The Afro-Asian network of racial justice in *Snakes* reveals the ways Lin noir fiction to preserve and exceed the traditional concerns of the genre. *Snakes* is a thriller like its predecessors—it horrifies readers not with the racial or non-human Other, but with its candid portrayals of the injustice of the law and law enforcement, and specifically how these hegemonic institutions seek to interpellate liminal subjects to further their profit and power. In staging its thrilling moments, Lin capitalizes on the conventional device of the locked room, from which the detective of color, Robert Chow, uncovers mysteries of liminal non/citizens of American Chinatowns, among which is his father.

As a descendent of a man who was smuggled and who trafficked in smuggling, Robert is a liminal subject through and through: he is a Chinese American who does not identify with either Chinese or American cultures; he is a police officer, and the son of a criminal; he literally lives at the transitional spot between neighborhoods, and is

psychologically inundated by repetitive traumatic memories from the past. From Robert's liminality arises an alternative, non-essentialist subject position that identifies with and seeks racial justice, which gives shape and consistency to who he is as a person. Robert's persistent pursuit of racial justice in Chinatown—despite the lack of institutional support from his precinct—reveals the development of his subject position and self-knowledge. His personal gains and the gains of Chinatown—with one less snakehead now, thanks to his exposure of Mr. Ng's trafficking racket—show that people of color (especially immigrants and veterans) are encumbered by history of racism and imperialism, and thus need to be guided by a non-sovereign system of justice that would care for them. *Snakes* puts forth the possible network of friendship as a blueprint towards a society of racial justice in which justice there is no longer defined by a single white sovereign, but decided upon the mutual interests of fellow citizens.

Conclusion

Whether in the guise of prose or film, popular noirs of the post-war eras (in the 40s, 70s, and 90s)—have inculcated into the American cultural imaginary the notion that the back alleys and multicultural neighborhoods of America's cities are covered in a veil of undifferentiated darkness that corresponds to the fallen order of the legal other. Unfair portrayals of inner cities as nests of petty crime and violence feed into the racism and classism of the law enforcement called upon to police these neighborhoods, legitimizing the law's stringent containment and discriminatory stratification of racial others in and across liminal spaces like border camps and shanty towns. The noir convention, in short,

is not unlike its progenitors in the detective lineage: it has not been kind to people of color.

Southland and *Snakes* contest the conventions of the most popularized noir narratives such as works by Don Winslow and Michael Connelly that vow to uncover the underbelly of metropolitan lives which so often feature either China or Chinatown, Asian or Asian American characters, or at the least, white detectives who claimed to have come back from Asia. As detective stories told from the point of view from investigators of Asian descent, *Southland* and *Snakes* reveal that Central LA and NYC Chinatown were and remain economically degraded and segregated; but even as they concede these factors, Revoyr's and Lin's fictional worlds do something different: they contextualize the living reality of urban decay within the longer racial history of the US in which the law and law enforcement has disenfranchised and dismantled communities and lives of color by drawing color, class, and legal lines between groups.

In *Snakes* and *Southland*, the investigative journeys of their Asian American detectives Robert Chow and Jackie Ishida invite readers into fraught and complex worlds of minoritarian policing and justice-seeking, worlds that reveal the hazards of collaboration with the forces of authority, and the layers of deception and complicity that often conceal and obstruct inter-racial affinity and coalition formation. In the process, Revoyr and Lin play with the trope of the Asian mystic inherited from traditional crime writing: they draw on the arbitrariness of Asian American as an identity and collective label, and use it to re-imagine who Asian Americans can be. In *Southland*, an Asian American is a boy who has been passing as black for his whole life. In *Snakes*, an Asian

American encompasses a multitude of ethnic Chinese ranging from the spectrum of legal to illegal.

Like their more conventional predecessors, the Asian American noir fictions *Southland* and *Snakes* are dramas of encounter, but of a different kind. The novels depict and enact transgressions of convention that open up Asian America to unanticipated lines of connection. In their acts of genre subversion, Revoyr and Lin have turned a form that has traditionally reified border enforcement into a mode of social critique that throws into bold relief the corruption and deception in the legal sphere, and imagines new networks of justice-making. The Afro-Asian partnerships between Jackie and James in *Southland* and Robert and Vandyne in *Snakes* demonstrate the workings of such networks: their investigations contest the hegemonic definition of “Asian-ness” in American law, which, as Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa have rightly pointed out, was established by the white nation-state to exclude immigrants of Asian descent from “legal, cultural and symbolic citizenship rights” (33). In offering correctives to legal injustice, *Southland* and *Snakes* rely upon the mode of narrative—the form in which the law is theorized, and most legal cases are made. These novels tell stories of judicious collaboration between Asian and African American lawyers, community leaders, and police officers, and in so doing disalienate Asian Americans from systematic exclusion and revise “Asian-ness” into a possible foundation for building inclusive coalition.

But in late capitalism, no community can be formed without money. As Miranda Joseph argues in *Against the Romance of Community*, even in the world of non-profits, we have to take into account the role of capital as a “supplementarity” (70). Building on

Joseph's definition of that term, the next chapter will situate Asian America at the crossroad between radical politics and transitional capital. The chapter will examine how Sam Tagatac's work from the Sixties, and Karen Tei Yamashita's work about the Sixties, comment upon the intersection between money and activism in documentary fiction, using textual hybridity to reflect and subvert the capitalist logic of reification.

Chapter Four

Remediating Asian America: The Representational Logic of Capitalism and the Camera in Documentary Fictions by Sam Tagatac and Karen Tei Yamashita

Chapters 1 through 3 have taxonomized Asian America in different forms of affective relations. This chapter will continue with that line of inquiry while also adding to it a discussion of the temporal and material shape of Asian America. It will do so by turning to two fictional portrayals of the International Hotel in San Francisco, which housed numerous Asian migrant workers and student activists during the Long Sixties. More specifically, the chapter will examine the genre of Asian American documentary fiction, a textual hybrid that slides between the styles of fictional prose and documentary script. This hybrid aesthetic defies the tradition of documentary fiction, which—as exemplified by war stories and profile essays—aims to provide readers with stories about lives from the social and global peripheries with descriptive transparency. This sliding maneuvering allows Asian American to replace the convention of transparency in documentary fiction with high-intensity realism: using fictional prose, Asian American documentary fiction simultaneously reflects the obliteration of racial subjects of capitalism under the process of abstraction, while using non-linear, script-like sections to convey the muddled racial memories and feelings that were obliterated by that same process. Asian America, as represented by Tagatac and Yamashita, thus emerges from transnational capitalism; their documentary fictions concretize it in an inter-class formation in which Asian peoples transgress the boundaries of stratification for the preservation of affordable housing options like the International Hotel.

The International Hotel was one of San Francisco's last affordable housing options for working-class Asian immigrants in the 1960s and 70s. Its position at the intersection between Manilatown and Chinatown and its ongoing role in providing affordable housing invested the building with symbolic significance for San Francisco's migrant communities. When the hotel's owner, the Four Seas Investment Corporation of Thailand, issued eviction notices to the building's elderly tenants in preparation for the its demolition and conversion into a parking lot, an uproar ensued; a host of civil rights organizations inside and outside of Asian American communities mobilized a massive civil disobedience campaign to protest the evictions and the building's impending demolition. On the night of the August 3, 1977, the date the evictions were set to take place, protestors surrounded the hotel, chanting, waving signs and posters, and forming a barricade to prevent the police from entering the building. Because the effort to save the International Hotel joined anti-eviction movement and the Civil Rights Movement (that watershed event which gave political meaning to the Asian/ American identity), the International Hotel has been credited by subsequent generations of Asian/ American critics as a historic monument that unified the heterogeneous Asian/ American population under the political goals of anti-racism and anti-capitalism.¹⁶

Eve Oishi is one of these critics. In her entry on the International Hotel in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, she offers a

¹⁶ Following David Palumbo-Liu, I use the slash between "Asian" and "American" in reference to the instability of the "and/or" to describe the host of legal and illegal Asian immigrants, and all those in between. In "The New Anak" and *I Hotel*, Asian/Americans—from the American-born Asians to Filipinos who are noncitizen nationals—are included and excluded by the US legal system to different degrees.

comprehensive overview of exhibitions, documentaries, and fictions related to the building to theorize what she calls the Asian/ American assemblage. Oishi references science studies and urban theories to posit the International Hotel as the “metaphor” (134) of Asian/ Americans’ participation in the anti-eviction movement—with the conjoining rooms and front stores of the building symbolizing the connections between Asians and Asian American activist organizations and tenants who were once housed by the hotel.

Undeniably, the tone of Oishi’s encyclopedic entry is celebratory, but her romanticization of “the battle over the I-Hotel” as “the founding event of the Asian American movement” (134) risks idealizing the protestors—or what Viet Thanh Nguyen has labeled as the “bad subjects” who defy social strictures—as the default forms of Asian Americans. Her formulation of the Asian/ American assemblage risks eliding the intersectional differences that existed in the actual history of the anti-eviction movement. At one point, quoting Daryl Maeda, Oishi writes “the bonds between members of this assemblage” are “obligatory” and “less logically necessary for the existence of the assemblage as a whole” (136). Ethnographic analyses like Maeda’s show how metaphorical readings of the effort to preserve the International Hotel like Oishi’s fail to attend to historical particularities. To be clear, I am not faulting coalitional politics per se—these remain important. Rather, I’m taking issue with the way the triumphalist rhetoric Oishi deploys neglects the many types of economic and social differences that are subsumed under the umbrella ideological term of racial solidarity.

Ideology coheres and also conceals differences, and that is illustrated by the record of factional rupture and conflict in the history of the anti-eviction movement. Habal's monograph *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* is one of the most significant of the ethnographies of the International Hotel. As a participant in the campaign, Habal recalls cases when the Asian/ American coalition fell apart, instances when the relations between Asian/ American protestors turned from solidarity to enmity. Habal notes that on the surface, the anti-eviction movements may have appeared like a united front, but in fact it was an alliance made up of three major groups: the NCA (Northern California Alliance), the IHTA (International Hotel Tenant Association), and the KDP (Katipunan Ng Mga Demokratikong Pilipino)—with each group motivated by different priorities. Some leftist revisionary sects within the groups like I Wor Kuen were happy to see the tenants evicted because they expected the evictions to create a public outcry that would put pressure on the government to make changes to the city's housing policies (125); while for other organizations, like the more pragmatic KDP, members just wanted to ensure the manongs had their everyday needs taken care of during and after the eviction (112).¹⁷

¹⁷In Ilokano, manong denotes older male relatives like elder brothers and uncles. The term has accrued a new layer of historical meaning in the US, and is now used by the Filipino American community to refer to the 100000 Filipino men who entered the country during the period from 1898 to 1946 when Filipinos were counted as US nationals and came to the US in pursuit of the American dream only to find themselves in barred from land ownership and the right to marry. Many of the manongs were welders, cooks, and farmers in Northern California. The International Hotel was popular among them an inexpensive choice of accommodation in the Bay Area.

The feuds within the anti-eviction movement illustrate that, rather than just standing as a catalyst for Asian/ American solidarity, the International Hotel was also a monument to disunity. Such reconsiderations of the International Hotel offer critics the opportunity to re-examine factors that made and broke Asian/ American coalitional politics. Oishi's "I Hotel" entry missed those opportunities because of her over-attachment to the International Hotel as the material foundation of the Asian/ American Movement. Her reading is symptomatic of a larger oeuvre of scholarship and art that is anxious to avoid confronting Asian/ America's identitarian incoherence. By seeking to stabilize the power differentials between Asian/ Americans, these works end up prioritizing shared common conditions over intersectional differences. This anxiety to settle intra-group differences has a deep-seated history in the fields of Asian/ American literature and literary criticism.

For instance, the editors of *Aiiiiieeee*, the first Asian/ American literary anthology, offered a very exclusive vision of who should be counted as part of the Asian/ American coalition. The writers included in the collection are all native born Asian/ Americans with writings that demonstrate the tendency towards ethnic nationalism. Likewise, in literary criticism, scholars like Sau-ling Wong used the (paradoxically exclusivist) criteria of resistance against exclusion and racism as the defining denominators of Asian-American-ness. In Wong's 1999 article "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," she expresses her wariness about the transnational turn in Asian American Studies in the fear that the constant influx of new subjects and

objects onto the field from another shore would dull the potency of the cultural nationalism Asian/ American activists fought for during the Civil Rights Movement.

Recent scholarship by Susan Koshy (2001), Steven Yao (2003), and Colleen Lye (2007) takes the discussion of Asian/ American coalitional politics in a different direction: they are concerned that analytics that solely focus on racial difference and resistance as the basis of Asian/ American politics are inadequate in reflecting the reality of the Asian/ American experience that is increasingly heterogeneous not only in terms of ethnicity but also class background. Their recommendation is to “taxonomize” (Yao 357) differences, to register racial difference in conjunction with other differences like class. In her introductory piece “In Dialogue with Asian American Studies,” Lye urges critics to practice “maximal ideological inclusiveness and maximal attenuation of the American link” (4). An example of attending to that “American link” which connects up all Americans of Asian descent is Susan Koshy’s framework of “stratified minoritization” (155). It locates whiteness, which, according to Koshy, has morphed itself into seemingly post-race (or race-less) attributes (like US citizenship and socio-economic prowess) as the common denominator of Asian/ American experiences.

In her article “Morphing Race Into Ethnicity: Asian/ Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness” Koshy zeroes in on Asian/ Americans’ mediatory status in relation to the black-white binary. Her analysis eruditely sifts through such cases as the disappearance of blackness in the making of a brown coalition in Monique Truong’s short story “Kelly”; and the causes and effects of the re-categorization of South Asians as whites in the 1970 US census. In so doing, Koshy makes a convincing argument that

coalitional politics cannot be simply assumed among people of color, especially given that each Asian/ American is separately stratified by whiteness and by class and racial appearance whenever they come into contact with the American empire/ US nation-state. Whiteness infiltrates non-white psyches and communities by its promise of the “subject effect” (165), that which compensates non-whites with white privileges when they make racial choices to differentiate themselves from the rest of their group. These white privileges include the right to enter this country and the power of political representation. As Koshy notes, in a global economy where Asians and Asian Americans are brokers the white nation-state relies on to facilitate capital flows and reshape the meaning of race, white and non-white strategic alliances need to be better theorized.

This chapter heeds Koshy’s, Yao’s, and Lye’s exhortations to rethink Asian/ American cultural politics in comparative and intersectional ways. It uses the art and history of the International Hotel as a way into understanding the conflicts and opportunities in Asian/American coalitional politics. Following Koshy, Yao, and Lye, this chapter analyzes the events of the International Hotel through a comparative intersectional lens by reading Sam Tagatac’s “The New Anak” (1974) and Yamashita’s *I Hotel* (2001) as documentary fictions that account for the strategic alliances between whites and non-whites, and among non-whites. Though published half a century apart—“The New Anak” in the midst the hotel eviction, and *I Hotel* in anticipation of the arrival of the Manilatown Cultural Center—the works are similar in their style of genre experimentation, their concern with the issue of affordable housing, and their engagement with Asian/ American politics.

My analysis of these two International Hotel fictions taxonomizes Asian/American hybridity in aesthetic terms by offering up the genre analytic of Asian/American documentary fiction. It understands “The New Anak” and sections of *I Hotel* as hybrid narratives that fuse fictional prose and film scripts, straddling the line between fact and fiction, all with the aim of bearing witness to the stratified minoritization that Asian immigrants and their descendants went through. Just as the hybrid genre analytic operates to expose the intersectional differences between Asians and Asian Americans, my reading of the novels contests idealized accounts of the Asian/American identity that describe the group’s demographic reality in terms of heterogeneity and assemblage without really deploying the concepts as analytics. By this I mean that ethnic and cultural heterogeneity is represented but left unconnected with the impoverished material conditions that a particular population or community suffers from.

Taken together, this chapter problematizes what Koshy has called “parallel minoritization” (155)—that binary construct which assumes white and non-white opposition without attending to the messiness in between. As it does so, it foregrounds scenes that show whiteness (in the guise of American capitalism and citizenship) working in league with some Asians and Asian Americans to antagonize, marginalize and even erase others. I will furthermore argue that it is only by witnessing these moments of conflict then we can see more realistically Asian/Americans as subjects that are both subversive against and complicit in US capitalism.

I begin by carving out the genre analytic of Asian American documentary fiction from Marxist literary scholarship and media studies and situating it in the Asian/

American context. I then employ it to reclaim “The New Anak” as the ur-text of Asian American documentary fiction; through it, I re-interpret sections of *I Hotel* to make the case that both Tagatac’s and Yamashita’s textual hybridity remediates the Asian/American coalition from a united front into a disconnected heterogeneous population whose members are separated by socio-economic power differentials. Ultimately, this remediation represents an Asian/ American collectivity that is closer to the lived experience of racial subjectification and stratification. By this, I mean a collective identity not neatly constituted under the rubric of shared racial difference, but rather a strategic alliance cultivated by what Min Hyoung Song calls “an ethics of generosity”—or “an underground economy” of excesses in actions, affects, and ambitions (281).

Asian/ American Documentary Fiction

Since its inception, documentary fiction has been a term of literary hybridity. In *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (1996), Barbara Foley used documentary fiction as a shorthand to categorize realist novels situated at the border between fact and fiction that “represent reality by means of agreed-upon conventions of fictionality, while grafting onto its fictive pact some kind of additional claim to empirical validation” (25). Foley’s understanding of concepts like reality and literary realism arises out of her Marxist approach to historical materialist dynamics, under which labor vies with capital in a dialectical relationship whose trajectory is determined by variations in the political power of capitalists and the historical consciousness of workers. Fact and fiction, as such, are in a reciprocal relationship: documentary fictions are realist texts that capture historical materialist reality, and in turn

(seek to) change the reality of the historical present through the lessons and the truths they impart on readers. Foley further explains this by specifying that documentary novels are “mediations of mediations” (101) where the mimetic texts “reproduce real social relations” by “ideological constructions of those relations” (101). Seen from this light, the “documentary” in documentary fictions is a descriptor of the fictions’ remediated nature of reality—where texts mediate into words the otherwise disparate realities that were sutured together by the capitalist real. Foley continues to add, documentary fictions are “not simply passive reproducers of existing realities” (102); they are also a “force of production” that “press inherited epistemological confines to their limits, preparing the way for revolutionary new types of abstraction, both conceptual and real” (102).

For instance, in the modernist work that Foley analyzes, the *USA Trilogy* (1930-36), John Dos Passos captures the living reality of capitalism from below. Instead of devoting the entirety of the novel to one proletarian character and overgeneralizing her life as representative of all working-class people, he approaches capitalism as the transcending subject in reference, with each individual character stratified and interpellated by capitalism as an object showing the effects that global economy had on the people. The *USA Trilogy* is Foley’s primary example of how, from the modernist era on, real abstraction is borne out by characters’ wrestling with capitalism. In the trilogy specifically, characters’ constantly talk about and wait for the revolution to come, showing the way the reality of capitalism engenders disillusionment and catalyzes the people’s desire for change as conditioned by the monotonous cycle of “commodity exchange” (228). The integration of primary source material – including song lyrics and

newspaper clippings – into Dos Passos’s trilogy further shows that documentary fiction for Foley is a hybrid genre that not only combines fact with fiction, but also to serve the double tasks of reflecting the capitalist real and catalyzing changes within it.

Subsequent theorists of documentary fiction, including Leonora Flis in *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and Contemporary Documentary Novel* (2010), maintain the essence of hybridity in the genre. In her introduction, Flis admits that her use of “documentary” is interchangeable with “non-fiction” (1). Flis’s formulation of “non-fictional” fiction may appear to be oxymoronic, but it is only because the term is used to categorize fiction pieces that emerged from the strange times of the American Sixties and Seventies, when the American military complex and capitalist corporatism, coupled with the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, eroded Americans’ trust in and reliance on the government and other institutions of authority.

Imitating in literary forms the country’s dis-integration of power from the political center of Washington DC are those fictive pieces that Flis calls documentary fictions and its “close narrative siblings” (19) New Journalism. According to Flis, their “reconstruction of history and literary aspirations” (69) lays a “claim [on] true and unmediated account of reality, though always intertwined with interpretative and rhetorical means” (80). Quoting works like Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968)—a collection of short stories that offer a grim portrait of San Francisco during the heyday of counterculture (such as a school-aged child fed LSD by her parents)—Flis’s conceptualization of documentary fiction is an update of Foley’s, with untypical characters in late capitalism functioning as the abstractions of the forgotten American

populations who were subject to the war-mongering American nation-state, whose investment in infrastructure and the people receded. In short, the decentered and decentering American capitalism is the latest subject and object in reference of documentary fiction, a genre that, as Flis notes, is doing the job of relaying to the public truths that the White House and mainstream media had given up on.

In Foley's and Flis's thinking, documentary fiction is a hybrid genre that mixes facts with fictional effects, where authors employ aesthetic devices to depict the historical materialist dynamics underlying reality. This definition provides us with a lens to read "The New Anak" and *I Hotel* as literary narrations that encapsulate the reality of lives lived under the constant anxiety about and caused by capitalist displacement. For instance, in "The New Anak," though Elpidio, Macario, and Doming are fictive characters, they are what Foley would call conceptual abstractions, character types that testify to the differing effects that global capitalism had on veterans, welders, cooks, and farmers. The same can be said about *I Hotel*: each novella in the chronicle enumerates the different degrees of separation and connection between Asian/ Americans as stratified by global capitalism. But these stories are as universal as they are singular: the tenants' eminent displacement and the activists' abjection in the face of their fight against gentrification is a common "a priori" condition for all those who live in the Bay Area. And yet, stories of their solidarity are exceptional cases because they divulge contradictory moments of capitalism as it made possible coalitions between supposedly alienated workers.

But Foley's and Flis's formulations of documentary fictions can only help us to understand "The New Anak" and *I Hotel* so far. Since their thinking of the documentary is mostly removed from the visual context of the term, reading Tagatac's and Yamashita's works through them will leave the awareness of the cinematic spectatorship in *I Hotel* and "The New Anak" unaccounted for. For instance, how should we understand the audio effects in "The New Anak" like the occasional "rrrrrrr"—that sometimes signify the rotation of a film reel, and other times the shooting sounds of a rifle; or the stage directions in the "1968," "1969," and "1977" sections of *I Hotel* that make readers conscious of the filming in progress?

Textual experimentation has long been a tradition in the expression of Asian/American history. In her 1999 monograph *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe argues that literary experimentation is a crucial means by which Asian/Americans pass down the cultural lore of "material memory" (126). She asserts that Asian/American writers record and reflect their living conditions in their work not only for the sake of historical preservation but also in effort to think through materials and opportunities they require in order to be free. Asian/American writers' imagination of freedom is inextricably tied with literary forms: their articulation of it is always inseparable from using orthodox narrative genres with a difference. That double movement of participating in and yet abstaining from the master tools is, according to Lowe, the trademark of "Asian American cultural negativity" (31), exemplified by texts that refuse to "instrumentalize [American] national culture" (31).

For example, Lowe highlights the formal impurity of texts such as Fai Myenne Ng's *Bone* and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* as examples of Asian/ American writers uncomfortably pushing back against conventions of traditional Western genres like autobiography and bildungsroman.

Lowe's work helps deepen our understanding of the role of genre hybridity in "The New Anak" and *I Hotel*. By incorporating these genre forms, the texts' historical materialist critiques gain testimonial power. At the same time, the mixing of documentary film scripts and fictional prose can be understood as part of an aesthetic gesture of refusal against the stereotypes perpetuated by the media against Asian/ Americans. By remediating racial representations in the media that had the history of exoticizing Asian bodies, and distancing them as lives severed from the everyday reality, Tagatac's and Yamashita's documentary fictions repurposed them in their stories to show off the limitation of the camera. To put it in Lowe's words, the genre experimentation in "The New Anak" and *I Hotel* "displaces the orthodoxies of both historical and [media] representation" (126), and "excavates the material histories that have been subjugated or erased by these aesthetics" (126).

Asian/ Americans have a complicated history with the media. The video camera, which has been compared to the symbol of the Western hetero-patriarchal quest for meaning from the sexual and racial others by postcolonial film critics and artists (famously by Trinh T. Minh-ha, Edward Said, and Laura Mulvey), accrued a different political meaning for the activist community during the Civil Rights movement. According to a 2012 interview with Françoise Palleau-Papin, Karen Tei Yamashita

mentions that “section[s of her novel] [are] imagined as a video documentary or screenplay.” With those sections, Yamashita wanted to “bring to the book all different kinds of cultural production going on in the period.” In the Sixties, she continues, “many artists, filmmakers, and photographers got their footing at that time, and they processed their imagination through this idea of a revolution or change in society.” In *I Hotel*, “[she] wanted to document how it started, what trajectories ethnic communities took in order to make this medium useful” (5).

Though not directly acknowledged as such, Tagatac was one of the documentarians in the Asian/ American community Yamashita described as “hav[ing] found a footing” in the Sixties and Seventies by photography and filmmaking. According to the author biography published in 1974 by the *Aiiieeee* anthology, Tagatac’s “The New Anak” is the artist’s only written piece. Its layout obviously shows influences from Tagatac’s background in films. The story boldly incorporates cinematic audios and visuals in the achievement of realism. When read from a contemporary perspective, “The New Anak” can be seen as an early, if not one of the pioneering examples, of what Lowe calls “Asian American cultural negativity” whose unconventionality “put[s] pressure on” cinema by “restructuring” it in written words, which subvert the “regimes of uniformity” of both filmic and fictional narratives (127). Similarly, episodes in the “1968,” “1969” and “1977” sections of *I Hotel* turn on their cinematic effects. Like Tagatac, Yamashita integrates features of documentary films (like ending credits) in her re-telling of stories about racial and housing justice. Also like its precursor “The New Anak,” *I Hotel* embodies that particular Asian/American hybrid form (that Lowe exemplifies with

Dogeater, *Dictée*, and *Bone*) where its unconventional narrative forms, which are neither strictly theatrical nor fictional, are indexical of the disjunctions between Asian/ American literature and any single given narrative type.

Asian/ American particularities are experiences characterized by contradiction: cultural, national, or socio-economical. Asian/ American documentary fictions are literary vessels for the delivering of those contradictions. They connect the past to the historical present, which makes them at once retrospective and future-making as they transmit one generation of Asian immigrants' material and materialist memories to another. Their textual impurities are tailor-made to fit with the edges and splinters of contradictory experiences. "The New Anak" and *I Hotel* instantiate that.

For example, in "The New Anak," Tagatac jolts readers out of the diegetic present of the story by inserting into the script of a documentary film the dizzying PTSD episodes from Elpidio's mind, which become recursive after he kills a Vietnamese civilian when stationed at a US military camp in Vietnam. By highlighting the role of an Asian/American soldier in fighting an American imperial war in Asia, the episode also challenges the assumption of coalitional politics that assume all Asians are in solidarity in the fighting against American capitalist imperialism. These episodes from the past, when compared to scenes of the present in the documentary script, in which Elpidio is enjoying with other manongs the snooker tables that he runs in one of the hotel rooms, exposes that capitalism binds Asians together as much it separates them.

I Hotel offers a no less complicated account of class and race. The documentary film in "1968" records live the unexpected death of the documentary anchor Edmund Yat

Min Lee who is shot dead while investigating Chinatown tongs' infighting in San Francisco. Judy Eng, the camera person of "1969," captures with her device the dissonance between the J-town Collective and CANE, two groups whose membership largely overlaps, and whose polyvocality renders the collective label "MEMBERS" under which they are all subsumed inadequate. These moments of Asian/ American incoherence are contrasted with those of coherence. In the "1977" section, as the collective narrator finishes their filmic account of the demolition of the International Hotel, they launch onto a fantastic narrative of rebuilding "a greater layered and labyrinth international hotel of many rooms" which they call "the urban experiment of a homeless community" "to house the need of temporary lives" (605). This imagined building in the novel turns out to be the Manilatown Cultural Center in reality erected in 2005; attached to the center are 105 rooms of subsidized housing. By remediating fact in fiction, the present in the past, Yamashita's documentary fiction narrativizes that the International Hotel's inter-ethnic and inter-generational legacy is constructed out of the generosity of resources and ambitions from generations who came before it, even as the novel reveals the ongoing power of capital in the United States over non-white labor.

The Asian/ American mixed media artist Trinh T. Minh-ha would call the reading of the collages pieced together by two or more mediums—of the sort undertaken in the reading above—"a creative act." In one of the interviews attached to her film scripts published in *Framers Framed*, Trinh notes that "reading a film is a creative act and I continue to make films whose reading I may provoke and initiate, but not control. . .the viewer can fold it horizontally, obliquely, vertically. The interfolding and interweaving

situation is what I consider to be the most exciting” (173). What emerges from the push and pull of taking full control and letting go on the page is what Trinh calls “excess”; other theoretical terms she uses interchangeably with it are “the third meaning” and “the blind field” (174).

Trinh’s vision of aesthetic excess is a central feature of “The New Anak” and *I Hotel*, which blend anti-racist documentary film techniques that challenge the habitual quest for meanings in their fictions. These excessive moments create in the readers the effect of a short-circuit: in “The New Anak” it takes place when the rumbling “r”s interrupt textual flow; while in *I Hotel*—more specifically in “1968”—it happens when the fourth wall breaks down as the camera person Judy Eng swings her camera around as she searches for Edmund’s killer, collapsing the distance that is supposed to be standing between the audience and Chinatown’s violence. These moments shatter the poles of the absolutes in the white and non-white binary with scenarios when a Filipino man conspires with the American army to kill an innocent Vietnamese girl, and when a Chinese American young activist is shot dead by Chinese American mobs which the San Francisco police force do not care to curb.

These scenes of Asian-on-Asian violence reveal how conflicts created by American capitalist hegemony ceaselessly invalidate the term of Asian/ American as a collective noun. Furthermore, reading them with whiteness in mind also throws into relief whiteness’s negative presence within Asian and Asian American communities. Powered by American capitalism and citizenship, whiteness constantly pits non-whites against each other; the hegemony of white capitalism structures reality for Asians and Asian

Americans who come into contact with the US nation-state/ American imperialism. But, as “The New Anak” and *I Hotel* remind us, that precondition can also be retooled for the advancement of disenfranchised lives.

The work of the Marxist literary scholar Timothy Bewes helps to further suture Foley’s and Flis’s account of documentary realism to Lowe’s account of Asian/American genre hybridity. Following Bewes, it is possible to see the Asian/America represented in “The New Anak” and *I Hotel* as a “taking place,” one that is both instantiated by capitalism and also in reaction against it. In his article “Capitalism and Reification: The Logic of the Instance” Bewes notes that, “capitalism does not misrepresent us; it instantiates us—not as something we are not, but as who we are” (226). Bewes’s view here is congruent with Foley’s and Lowe’s, who believe that capitalism is the dominant structuring force of life in the contemporary United States. For Bewes, the production of autonomous representations that are capable of interrupting the vicious cycle of capitalist history is a two-part step: it involves artists adhering to the capitalist logic of abstraction in their artistic productions, the process that gives the art form and the artists autonomy; it is only after gaining such freedom within the system the artists and their arts can undermine capitalist logic by exposing the system’s limitations and contradictions. The process of reification is one that creates abstractions, or “abstract entit[ies] in the form of commodit[ies]” (215), and that, according to Bewes is a historical dynamic that artists have to contend with; but instantiation, per Bewes, is one that they can resist. As he sees it, “instantiation is an event in which an entity (a person, an object, a linguistic sign, an encounter, a fictional description, a character trait) is asserted as an

instance of a larger category, property or concept, to whose reality it supposedly attests” (216). Literature, for Bewes, is a privileged site of representation that is capable of representing the capitalist real without repeating the logic of instantiation. Through the means of what he calls “literariness” (229), Bewes says, art is able to sketch out the contour of a “representation without instantiation”—that which is at once inseparable and distinct from the normative logic of capitalist reification (230). In establishing his case, Bewes makes an allusion to Deleuze’s work on cinema, a case of great relevance to our discussion of the textual mediation of the visual in “The New Anak” and *I Hotel*. Putting Bergson’s idea of “pure perception” in conversation with Deleuze and showing how the latter’s work on media bolsters the former’s theory on phenomenology, Bewes says “cinema offers a material substratum for the time-image, one that makes no reference to subtractive perception” (230).

When read in light of Bewes’s theories, scenes of solidarity and disjunctions in “The New Anak” and *I Hotel* are the “time-images” (232) of Asian/ American heterogeneity. At once emerging and disappearing, iterations of Asian/ American heterogeneity instantiate and seek to negate the capitalist logic of abstraction. They affirm Asian/ Americans as shaped by US capitalism and stratified differently in relation to one another; they also negate capitalism—particularly its alienating effect—by showing moments of contradiction when Asian/ American laborers bind together in commemoration and in support of each other’s struggle and survival under capitalism. These mixed moments ultimately make visible the fact that not all Asian immigrants are

spotlight, he says “I’m goinggoinggoing/ to/be/in/a movie a moviemovieamoveiamovie/usst oi ano baito (what is this) pilm me, please pilm” (152). The cacophony of his banTERS, which is characterized by a style of Tagalog fusing with ungrammatical English, is echoed by another manong, Doming, who tells the camera person, “If you want the real life of me here, you down to the Stockton [...] then you can make all kinda pilm you doon...then pg ka tapos [afterwards] you go down to Presno. But now you arerrrrrrrr taking the/picture/here” (157-8). The accents and code-switching shared by the manongs mark them a homogenous group of working-class immigrants. In addition to their speech, their dispositions also render them interchangeable to the camera. Doming and Macario are almost identical in the transcript of the documentary film: they each don a melancholic look. In one scene, when all the manongs are playing snooker, Doming appears to have lost himself in rumination. Standing next to the pool tables, he “squints/peers into what he cannot see” (157). And the same goes for Macario, who mutters to himself before the camera, “how will I know Clara when I return?” (168). Their similarity becomes distracting at one point when Doming’s reminiscence of his girlfriend in the Philippines (Juana) is jumbled up with Macario’s regret for leaving his girlfriend in the Philippines (Clara). All that separates the two narratives in that fused sentence are the three dots of an ellipsis.

The homogeneity of the manongs’ speech, affective disposition, and backstory demonstrates the process of abstraction that an early generation of Filipino immigrants were subject to. Drawn by the allure of the American dream, they came to the country as noncitizen nationals with little education, and many ended up taking labor-intensive jobs

that native-born Americans did not want. In this way, the totalizing force of US imperial capitalism stratified, abstracted, and wounded the manongs: pulling them from their homeland, forcing them into menial jobs, and taking a toll on their mental health by separating them from their families and denying them the material comfort advertised by the American dream. The documentary film embedded within Tagatac's narrative accurately reflects the manongs peripheral position as a secluded group of aging bachelors. But it does not necessarily capture the entirety of manong reality during that period. As Doming says to the cameraperson, "if you want to see the real life of me here, go to Stockton and Fresno." The frame of the film's visual representation is limited to the here and now. The merging of the story's filmic and prose elements complicates the depiction of the manongs.

Tagatac uses two forms of flashback to deepen our sense of the manongs' individuality. These flashbacks connect the diegetic present of 1970 San Francisco with the early 20th century Central Valley, Vietnam and Philippines. The flashbacks come in two forms. Some occur as vignettes formally incorporated into the script of the documentary film within Tagatac's story. Other flashbacks are rendered as spontaneous, prompted by emotional responses to conversations and mementos. This cross-genre fictionalization deepens the characterization of manongs, showing that even as they have been abstracted by capitalism, and appear "interchangeable," they are actually quite distinct. In this way, Tagatac's story resists the instantiation Bewes describes.

For example, Elpidio, who we learn once served as a Filipino GI, is haunted by the flashbacks that mark him as both a victim and a beneficiary of the American military

records a dream sequence set in the province of Ifugao in the Philippines. The central narrative is Elpidio's encounter with a ghostly child who carries with her the smell of "rotten fish" (150). Enticed by her whimsical presence, Elpidio follows the girl around and insists on talking with her. As they walk around, other children in the field laugh at the girl behind her back, mocking her for her stink, and "pelting the little girl with fruit" (151). Just as the episode threatens to take a troublingly sexual turn, the girl asks Elpidio, "do you not know what my smell is?" then proceeds to disrobe, showing him her bare breast, on which is inscribed an open wound that is "clear as day" (151).

It is only during the second episode of Elpidio's dreams that readers find out she is Elpidio's victim under his gun. Elpidio murdered her while serving in the US military in Vietnam. The story recounts a scene set on a "silent bridge made of bamboo" which Elpidio was assigned to guard (193). His mission was to ensure that no vehicles passed the bridge after dark. One night, "a little girl, teenage, woman" rode by on her bike, and Elpidio "prevented her passage," executing her just as he was ordered (193). Addressing himself in second person, Elpidio says, "what great wounds you made in her chest, ripped right off [...] RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR" (166). Different from the previous whirring sound, this one is an onomatopoeia of blasting ammunition, a denotation that closes out this violent scene in the veteran's mind. As trauma theorist like Cathy Caruth (1995) would have it, these recursive dreams serve as signs of mental distress, untreated. Gradually, they accrue a temporality of their own, frequently inserting themselves into the present from the past, testifying to the collateral damage caused by war in both the victims and the victimizers.

By putting Elpidio's current status as a tenant in the last affordable housing option in San Francisco side-by-side with his past as a dutiful soldier sworn to serve the American army, "The New Anak" does two things. First, it indicts the US nation-state for failing to compensate and care for its veterans, and especially, its veterans of color. Elpidio's PTSD episode reveals how a Filipino soldier was subject to capitalist military-industrial complex, damaged by it, and then rendered expendable. The story's representation of his experience may read as surreal, but it feels real: his collaboration with the American army and eventual abandonment by it makes him a synecdoche of the 260000 Filipino soldiers who decided to join the American army in exchange for citizenship but ended up not being properly compensated until President Obama signed the bill of "Filipino Veterans of World War II Congressional Gold Medal Act of 2015" into law. And second, the spectacular Asian-on-Asian violence staged by Elpidio's gruesome nightmares makes clear the "productivity" (179) of whiteness, which according to Koshy has morphed itself into a "power structure" (180) that causes intra-group conflicts between people of color. Though no white soldiers were shown to be present at the site of execution, the negative presence of whiteness articulated itself through the "r"s of Elpidio's shooting. Elpidio is subordinated by the whiteness of the US military complex and this distribution of power provoked his clash with the Vietnamese girl.

Similar to the case of Elpidio, other manongs like Doming and Macario do not fully come alive as individuated characters until flashbacks establish their relationships with other people of color. While different from Elpidio's nightmares, their memories show the other side of capitalism's contradiction: that it unintentionally leaves space for

supposedly alienated workers to make friends. Capitalism's contradiction becomes the most salient by the end of the documentary as Macario reads in front of the camera a letter addressed to his fellow farmhand, Francisco:

I remember each morning the pet rooster you set against...the knife flash. It had arrived in a wire cage and we had called it Canta for its pure song...how the hens in the barn perked their feathers...we are all swore, also the plants in the fields suspected, growing suddenly with souls out to the sun. (168)

Though the band of migrant farmers are now disbanded, the mementos they continue to exchange with each other, and the memories they carry with them continue to nourish them in tough times. The friendship between the farmhands formed in the field indicates how migrant laborers expropriate capitalist relations into non-capitalist ones that are not predicated on profit making. According to the narrator of the documentary, these non-capitalist relations are life-giving, providing Macario with much needed "reassurance" before he goes to work (167).

Just as contradictory as capitalism is, so too is this scene: Macario reads his letter to Francisco in front of the camera. Orality here animates imagination to go beyond the two-dimensional frame of a screen. The story that it tells exceeds the confines of the here and now, which is all that a camera can represent, transporting the reader to the Central Valley. "Non-reified remnants" manifest in two forms in this scene: they take the form of a letter that is not worth much, and past memories that have no use value. Though they yield no money, they nourish Macario, reminding him that he is more than a hand that welds, but a sentient human who feels.

Remembrance is that excessive labor that is required to make a life-giving sociality last—a lesson suggested by the story of the Filipino migrant, Baldo, a fellow

farmhand who died while laboring in the Lodi Valley who lives on in his friendship with Doming. Doming's reminiscence of Baldo is tragic: Baldo worked cultivating beets every day during winter from sunup until sundown. He estimates, "if the market stays level" his beets could "bring [his family] at least a thousand" (167). But it is not his beet crop, but his health, which fails. His sickness comes as a surprise to the other farmhands, who did not realize his absence at work until one of them notices that "the tractor lies rusting where he left it" (167): "he tells no one at last of his parting, only his back which they saw and did not understand" (167). Baldo's sudden death from overwork serves as a realistic rejoinder to his grandiose ambition of owning that "empty pale house at the top of the horizon" (167). The contrast between his unfulfilled dream and premature death foregrounds the unattainability of the American Dream for most workers, especially laborers of color, and exposes that mythic narrative as a capitalist ruse. The American Dream preaches that everyone, no matter where they come from, can become successful so long as they work hard. Doming's reminiscence of Baldo shows that there is a huge quantity of luck involved in the achievement of solvency for migrant laborers. Though Baldo did not live to own a home in America, his spirit lives under the roof of Doming's memories. And in turn, by remembering Baldo, Doming is particularized as friend, a special someone to Baldo who finds a sense of belonging far away from home. The stories of Baldo and Doming, along with that of Macario, put at the center stage the (im)material excesses—like memory and mementos—that are necessary in the forging of lasting Asian/American coalition. The centrality of excess is reinforced by the aesthetic excess of the genre hybridity Tagatac deploys to represent the manongs, and specifically

the way he deploys cross-genre shifts to illustrate how his characters are abstracted by capitalism while insisting on their individuality. The (im)material excess that undergirds Tagatac's deployment of genre hybridity illustrates that the logic of representing a non-agonistic Asian/American coalition is one that asks artists to think with and beyond the conceptual logic of abstraction, combining and challenging the orthodoxy of any one single genre to mirror Asian/American heterogeneity as produced by and in excessive of the capitalist logic of abstraction.

One last instantiation of Asian/American heterogeneity in "The New Anak" that is worthy of attention occurs in a rare moment of the documentary film. In this scene Tagatac provides a glimpse towards of what a radical alternative to capitalism might look like. In that scene, the author uses a mix of fragments, onomatopoeias, and exclamations that challenges the logic of conceptual abstraction which expects the scene to adhere to at least a single legible genre. The content of the scene also defies the capitalist logic of abstraction, where the manongs are shown as snooker players rather than workers—that form which US capitalism always expects Asians to be. By acting otherwise (both in form and content) this scene demonstrates an alternative Asian/American sociality (and presentation of it) that is at once derived from and in defiance of the logic of abstraction in capitalist terms, and also in the conceptualization that reflects it.

Moreover, the scene sketches out the imagination of an Asian American coalition achieved through what the critic Min Hyoung Song calls "the ethics of generosity." In his contribution to *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, Song posits an ethics of generosity as an alternative ethics to counter that of the austerity constantly demanded by

capitalism. To Song, generosity is the “hybrid deformity within capitalism that can lead us not beyond its horizons but a kind of turning inside-out or a making monstrous” (283). Generosity is a “deformity” in a capitalist age because it refuses the logic of maximizing self-interest. Its “turning inside-out” and monstrosity render it a practice of excess: it gives and shows far more than what capitalism – and especially neoliberal conformity – expects. It is unorthodox, too, because it calls for cooperation within the coalitions it forms, while capitalism generally brings forth competition. Proceeding with Song’s thinking, a new public of manongs comes into being at the snooker table through an ethic of generosity.

In the mid-point of the documentary, the cameraperson is sitting in one out of the seventy-five rooms of the International Hotel. There, tenants are gathered around a snooker table, gambling. The ambience of the room is grim: it is dimly lit by “bulbs” of “twenty-five watts” hanging from the ceiling that “look like hangman’s nooses” (159). The merry group of tenants in the center of the room stand in stark contrast to the grim surroundings, filling the confined space with “laughter and prayers” (154). The conviviality of the scene is punctuated by the “CRACKS” (154) of the snooker cues hitting, and cacophony of the “DITOS” (155) as billiard balls disperse.

Gathered together in this confined space, the strangers in the snooker room become friends after spending time in there “from sun up to sun down”; as one of the tenants discloses to the camera “we’re starting up a casino.” When the cameraperson inquires into the casino, asking “with what? Money...work...youguys?” (158), the crowd points at Elpidio, saying “No work, man. He’s a veteran” (158). Though this scene

risks reinforcing the century-old stereotype of Chinatowns as gambling dens, the idea of Filipino migrant workers and veterans running a casino together is radical—especially given that work is the sign that comes to signify Asian American-ness in the 60s and 70s right after the Immigrant Reform in 1965. To understand the radical dimensions of gambling, we need to turn to its relationship to play.

According to the *OED*, gambling is the “playing of games for stakes.”

Gambling—qua playing—has a subversive meaning in Asian American cultural studies. As Sau-ling Wong points out in “The Asian American Homo Ludens,” playing is an act that has the significance of “counteracting the diminishment of being, [which] has historically been assigned to the Asian Americans” (186). Laboring is that contradictory force that defines and diminishes Asian immigrants. Non-laboring, therefore, is an act of resistance against capitalist interpellation, particularly when we understand gambling in private as an idle anticipation for fortune’s deliverance, waiting for the arrival of wealth that is not subject to taxation.

“The New Anak” does not expect the manongs’ private casino come to fruition or offer them a way out of despair. At most, the tenants’ play resembles “a sign of abolition” (qtd. in Wong 184). When Jean Baudrillard clarifies in *The Mirror Of Production* how “non-labor” like gambling is not exactly abolition but “a sign of abolition,” he writes “although the concept of non-labor can thus be fantasized as the abolition of political economy, it is bound to fall back into the sphere of political economy as the sign, and only the sign of its abolition” (qtd. in Wong 184). Baudrillard here makes clear that Tagatac does not intend to stage a full-fledged abolitionist movement. Its quotidian

accounts of migrant workers and retirees, however, opens up a window of hope, showing a glimpse into what abolition may look like: an animated scene of communal rejoicing over the thrills of fortune. This scene may not last—and in fact, it was quelled by the demolition of International Hotel—but the manongs’ congregation around the snooker table reinforces the abolitionist strategy of expropriation. The manongs’ co-existence in the snooker room de-territorializes the International Hotel, turning it from an architecture of rooms that are supposed to separate bodies, into a place of sociality where tenants are conspiring for a better future.

As a historiographical document about the manongs, “The New Anak” is rather thin, especially in comparison to Yamashita’s *I Hotel*, which will be discussed below. But its hybridity still movingly testifies to the life cycles of transnational migrant laborers, and to the way their lives veer unpredictably from solidity to instability under capitalism. Tagatac’s fragmentary prose and film script trace out the manongs collectively vulnerable but still disparate and dignified lives. When taken together, these accounts represent migrant lives lived under the shadow of capitalism. Capitalism, as the story shows, is contradictory: it causes conflicts and competition among Asians and Asian Americans. But exploitative as the system is, its unpredictability provides opportunities for capitalist subjects to survive exploitation collectively, and even resist the system’s toxic culture. Elpidio’s, Doming’s, and Macario’s experiences further remind us that regardless of one’s socioeconomic status, one can be part of a transforming force within the system by offering up a generosity that is beyond what capitalism expects of us.

Karen Tei Yamshita's *I Hotel*

- **“1968”**

“Chinatown: Verité” (Chinatown Truth) is the seventh installment of “1968,” the first novella in *I Hotel*. The section is a script of the documentary film created by the character Edmund (the elected president of the Chinatown Youth Services) alongside fellow organization member Paul and the documentarian Judy Eng. In the context of the novella, the documentary is made to raise the awareness from the public—both inside and outside of the community—about the needs of Asian Americans, a task that the three young Asian American activists feel obligated to perform as active members of the Civil Rights movement.

The content of the documentary film is that of an ethnography, disrupting racial myths about Asian immigrants as it investigates the lives of those who reside in San Francisco's Chinatown. The structure of the documentary's script is unconventional: it is formatted like a manifesto—with lines, stage directions, and omniscient narration grouped in small segments under numerical bullet points. The first bullet point is a quotation from Roman Polanski's film noir *Chinatown* (1974), “Forget it, Jake—its Chinatown.” In Polanski's movie, the line is uttered to discourage the protagonist, Jack, a private investigator, from continuing his investigation into the corruption in the Los Angeles water authority. In this case, the stereotype of Chinatowns as dens of crime and irredeemable corruption is used as signifier for the corruption in Los Angeles and even the United States in its promulgation of the Vietnam War. As scholarly readings of the movie have it (i.e. William Luhr 2012), this line regurgitates and further contributes to

mainstream America's apathy towards Chinatown and other racial enclaves, because it reinforces the foul reputation of Chinatown for being dirty and dangerous. The quote from Polanski's movie sets off a media spectacle in the documentary film in Yamashita's novel.

The first scene of the documentary film plays with the plot in Polanski's film. It follows a Chinese janitor on his cleaning routine. On the day he is interviewed, the janitor happens to be wiping off blood stains splashed all over a garden's cement walkway—echoing the scene in Polanski's film where Jack finds a pair of spectacles belonging to a murdered water auditor in the fish pond tended by a silent Chinese gardener (a figure who is as stereotypically “inscrutable” as all the Asian characters in *Chinatown*). In the next scene of the documentary film in “1968,” an old Chinese man describes the “dual roles” (83) that Asian immigrants play to the camera, making his confession while looking straight into the camera. “I tell you something. We Chinese all actors. Pretending (smiles into the camera)” (83). Despite the hesitation, he continues his speech with the smirk “Great Chinatown secret is we all got two names [...] they send my check to my paper name, but they bury me with my real name” (83). The subsequent scene cuts to the young commenters, Edmund and Paul, who explain the double lives led by Chinese immigrants who landed in the country in the early 20th century. The two young activists unpack the meanings of “paper son” by surveying Angel Island poems, pictures of the detention centers on the island, and close-ups of “coaching books used by immigrants to memorize details about their paper villages and paper homes” (85).

What is most significant about Edmund and Paul's explication of the term "paper son" is the way it sheds light on how the old Chinese men in the Chinatown garden don two identities in front of the camera (janitor and actor) and in real life (Chinese and American). Their experiences harken back to the performativity of Chinatown lives that the opening scene pokes fun of, and reframe roleplaying as a trait required of Chinese immigrants in order to be admitted and stay recognized under white capitalism, a process that calls for strategic identity management as immigrants navigate the competing social realities capitalism produces. For paper sons, the name that they were born with and will be buried with is "real," even if that name is not "real" according to the American legal and economic system—because that's not the name under which they collect their paycheck. Like many Asian immigrants to the United States, the "real" is a role that paper sons need to play, a script that they need to memorize so as to pass the immigration officers' interrogation at Border Control. And after they enter the country, paper sons adopt their fake paper names, and act according to the rules, laws and expectations of the US legal and capital systems, even as they continue to be bound by the name they were given by their home communities. The examples of the two Chinatown old-timers show the emotional labor that is necessary in the maintenance of their "real" identities. Labor, as such is the subject in reference in this quotidian scene of Chinatown lives: the scene throws into relief the pervasiveness of whiteness (qua US citizenship and capitalism) the paper sons experience pre and post arrival in San Francisco, where immigrants are objects constantly forced to work (from reciting fake floor plans to wiping off spray paint on garden stools) to earn their tenuous place in this country.

But the “paper son” is only one type of Asian/American. There are other types situated at the intersections between multiple identities whose needs are ignored and unacknowledged by capitalism as they enter labor contracts. In the next scene of the documentary, we are introduced to an Asian American youth living under poor conditions. As he says to the camera “before the Ping Yuen (an apartment project)” “we lived on Stockton in a one-room, maybe eight by ten [...] I slept with my little brother on the sofa, his head that side, my head this side, and my sisters slept with my parents on the bed. We cooked everything on a hot plat, but mostly my dad bought home leftovers from the restaurant. Shit, we left, family of ten moved in” (87). The camera continues to follow the youth, now to his family’s new two-bedroom apartment in Ping Yuen. There, his living conditions aren’t significantly improved. Inside the apartment’s bathroom his dad is coughing and hacking, while sitting in the sitting room is his mother’s sewing machine. By day, she works in a garment factory, while “whirring” away at the sewing machine at night. From the next scene, we find out why Chinese-American needle workers like the interviewee’s mother have to do extra work after regular hours: the camera zooms in on a strike outside the garment factory Jung Sai, organized by women needle workers like the young interviewee’s mother. They are chanting “Jung Sai Unfair! ILGWU Demands Just Wages! Support Children for Working Mother! Boycott Plan Jane! Boycott Esprit! We Will Not Be Exploited! Close the Sweatshop!” (88). When taken together, these two scenes represent the intersectional problems that migrant women workers and their children face. As migrant women enter the workforce, the capitalist system expects them to act like clones of the ideal laborer—who is always gendered male; as a result, it

neglects women's needs for child care. Worst still, they are doubly marginalized by the textile industry in Chinatown because their company Jung Sai (a Chinese-owned factory) undercompensates their employees with wages below the minimum rate. By depicting these lesser-known images of the housing crisis and workers' strike in Chinatown, "Chinatown: Verité" embeds in Yamashita's novel the inconvenient truth that Chinatown is not a site of thoroughgoing resistance, as Yoonmee Chang has argued, but a site of exploitation. And as Susan Koshy notes, "restaurant workers and migrant workers in small and large Asian capital often deploy the discourse of ethnic and family loyalty to enforce discipline and extract compliance" (163).

By portraying the protests of a Chinese garment worker who had to leave her child and sick spouse at home because of work, this segment of the documentary film urges the audience to reckon with white capitalism's omnipresence in the Asian/American community as it stratifies lives according to race, gender, and class. More specifically, the scene foregrounds the class differential between Asian/Americans. Some immigrants, like the overseas Chinese immigrants in Aihwa Ong's studies, are extended "flexible citizenship" (qtd. in Koshy 164) by the US government because of their contributions to US capitalism: they are granted citizenship because of the capital they bring into the US economy and the revenues their spending habits and/or productivity will continue to generate inside the country. The absent sweatshop owner in the scene of protest of "Chinatown: Verité" falls into this category. His company in Chinatown serves as a link between US capital and the Chinese community; through such connections, whiteness manipulates Chinatown and its residents via monetary investment

and labor exploitation. Seen in this light, Chinatown is not a ghetto severed from the rest of the society, or that place which has nothing to do with whiteness. On the contrary, it is directly and indirectly shaped by whiteness's strategic distance and negligence. This is further illuminated in the final scene in "Chinatown: Verité," which depicts an act of Asian/American-on-Asian/American violence, another example that looks ostensibly unrelated to whiteness.

In the scene, Edmund is fatally shot when investigating a fight between tongs in Sai Yong, a Chinese restaurant on Jackson Street that gangsters frequent. Edmund's sudden death as part of the documentary jolts the audience: it forces them to confront the realization that Chinese immigrants and their descendants are bearing the brunt of the US nation-state's discrimination against Chinatowns. This indifference to crime and health problems in Chinatowns is a racial choice the US government has made over and again since the eighteenth century. That attitude of avoidance which seems to suppose that Chinatown will one day wipe itself out by its own virus, vice, and violence is one that is reified in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. But the noir film is only a re-articulation of a longer history of racism that can be dated back to the 1885 when it was endorsed by a document published by the San Francisco government. That year, the department commissioned a committee to investigate the "Chinese problem." The following is an excerpt from the findings of a San Francisco committee after its excursion into the San Francisco Chinatown:

Your Committee were at that time impressed with the fact that the general aspect of the streets and habitations was filthy in the extreme, and so long as they remained in that condition, so long would they stand as a constant menace to the

welfare society as a slumbering pest, likely to generate and spread disease should there be visited by an epidemic in any virulent form. (83)

As the report further argued: even without a virus outbreak, Chinatown was likely to collapse under the weight of its violence: it writes, “the evidence is conclusive that [the Chinese] have well organized tribunals of their own which punish offenders against themselves when it is in their interest to punish, but which never punish those who violate the laws of the city or the State.” The report underlines the committee’s advice to the city of San Francisco to differentiate itself from Chinatown, withholding its regulations and protection from the racial enclave. Although this advice was never implemented in strict legal terms, its spirit informed the attitude toward Chinatown on the part of law enforcement and civil services, a hostile and dismissive “hands off” attitude that led to the burgeoning of tongs in Chinatown under whose gunshot civilians like Edmund suffered. When situated within the racist history that led to the rise of Chinatowns in urban American metropolis, it is not an overstatement to say that the white US nation-state which neglected Chinatown and indulged the Chinatown gangs is directly culpable for Edmund’s death.

The script of “Chinatown: Verité” reflects the reality of the US nation-state’s indifference to Chinese ethnic enclaves. In this section, Judy and Edmund enter Chinatown, intent on making a film that will bear witness to civilians’ vulnerability to the tongs’ violence. And then, suddenly, the violence they had come to document strikes them: Edmund is hit by a stray bullet and dies. Shaken, Judy continues to film, “reeling” the camera around trying to look for the murderer, but only managing to snap a few “swirling visuals” of “faces, guns, flash of neon and scuffle of dark bodies” (90). These

glimpses of menacing instability bring Chinatown's violence closer to the audience. The "breaking of the fourth wall," whereby Edmund suddenly becomes a victim of the story, instead of merely its narrator or witness, confronts audience members with the consequences of their and their government's indifference towards problems in Chinatown. Juxtaposing this ending with the opening credit extracted from the famous scene "Forget it Jack—It's Chinatown" from Polanski's noir, Yamashita recapitulates the stereotypes about Chinatown only to later call attention to the ways they are reified by capitalism and racism.

As a whole, "Chinatown Verité" is structured by twenty-six bullet points, with each point featuring a stereotypical description of Chinatown in prose followed by a script that complicates and contests typecasts. The script refracts the static image of Chinatown described in the prose into a socioeconomically diverse locale that is at once a textile production plant, a haven for inexpensive restaurants, and a habitat for Chinese immigrants. In multiplicity, Yamashita—via her documentarian characters (Edmund, Judy and Paul)—animates Asian America as a site that is inextricably tied to the general public. By making the already proximate relation between Chinatown and the rest of San Francisco feel unmediated and close, the hypothetical camera in "Chinatown: Verité" enlivens the racial enclave, transforming it from a distant spectacle into an inseparable part of our living reality with real problems that are deserving of our attention and that of the government.

- **“1969”**

“1969: I Spy Hotel” is the second novella in *I Hotel* that is structured like a script. The novella is made up of three installments: two of them—“Dossier #9066” and “A Need to Know Basis”—are transcripts of surveillance videos made by government agents who are spying on ex-internees and radical activists. The third installment, “Recorded Live in Your Face” was produced by Judy Eng from “1968” in dedication to Edmund. Laid out like “Chinatown: Verité,” “Recorded Live in Your Face” is composed of 17 bullet points, each containing a prose description of the setting in which Judy made her film, with each point followed by a script of a scene that her camera captured. Recorded from a participant-observant perspective, Judy’s documentary shadows the life of UC Berkeley student activist James BaBa, known to his friends as JB. JB is a dynamic documentary subject. His role in the group CANE (Citizen Against Nihomachi Eviction)—and the conflicts in the group arising out of different approaches to negotiating capitalist exploitation in the community—highlights the way capitalism subverts and complicates Asian/American coalitional politics, and more specifically, the way the scarcity of capital shared among Asian/American activists makes them competitive against each other. In depicting these conflicts, Judy’s documentary reminds the audience that incoherence, not unity, often defines Asian/American politics, a fact that is frequently occluded by the rhetoric of coalitional politics which tends to subsume dissonance under solidarity. By depicting the Asian American Movement in its nascence, “Recorded Live in Your Face” re-situates the Asian/ American community as one that is in constant tension within and outside of itself. These tensions, as the film divulges, are

caused by capitalism and the degree to which Asian/Americans collaborate with and react against the system.

Judy chooses James BaBa as her investigative subject because he is a representative subject—what Foley would call the conceptual abstraction of a group of student activists who found sudden empowerment in their vocal boycott against all authorities during the long Sixties. Read on the surface, JB’s rise on campus may appear unrelated to capitalism, and might even mark him as an outsider to the system; but if we take Mark Chiang’s work into consideration, JB’s radicalism comes to seem a product of and a fuel that feeds into capitalistic competition on campus. As Chiang notes in *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies*, the Asian/ American activist community was originally considered to be that entity which possessed the cultural capital of Asian/ America. But because the radical elements of the community sought to shut the university down, a move incompatible with the university’s mission to “open up” to diverse cultures and peoples for academic exchange (220), those radical elements were eventually purged from the institution, and were replaced as representatives of Asian/America by academics; researchers who were either from Asian/American communities or had studied them extensively. This replacement consequently created and continues to create problems around the ethics of representation, raising the fundamental question of who owns the cultural capital of Asian/ America. Judy’s film tells a version of this story by capturing the tug-of-war for power between Professor Thomas Hisaji Takabayashi and his students in the course “The Asian American Experience” at UC Berkeley.

The film depicts a particular moment in the class, a guest lecture by the noted Professor Harold Hass. During Hass's lecture, students interrupt him twice: the first time to accuse Hass's book of appropriating Japanese culture, and the second time to indict Hass for stereotyping Asian people by applying his research on the Japanese in Japan to the understanding of the Japanese American's psychology—an overgeneralization that is actually committed on the students' part, not Hass's. The crowd of students further yell the epithet "racist" at Hass by drawing unfounded inferences from his book. The episode culminates with JB and fellow classmates ushering Professor Takabayashi and guest speaker Professor Hass away from of the podium, while insulting them and chanting, "Say it loud. I am black and I'm proud" (132).

The fallout between Asian American students and professors shows that the students believe they know better than their professors what knowledge they need to acquire. As suggested by their angry declarations, that knowledge clearly is not contained in the lecture prepared for them by Professor Takabayashi. Most of the students in the class—with JB as a telling example—are active participants of the Third World Strike on campus, and they find radical activism more relevant to the Asian/American experience than the subjects on the syllabi that the institution has curated for them. In direct competition to the professors' teaching materials, a student organizer announces in Takabayashi's absence "a field component of the course at the I Hotel of the City" (132) where he will lead the class to "paint and repair" the contested building (132). Two strands of knowledge are in competition in the course of "The Asian American Experience": art and activism versus the discourse of psychology. The competition

between these domains testifies to the separation between the community and the academy in Asian/America—with cultures from the community losing out on institutional funds, and academics often failing to put to use student activist energy and vision.

As a student protest leader, JB charismatically straddles the divide between academia and community. But as his example shows, charitable impulses, like the mission to bring community knowledge back to campus, can be subverted by the capitalist impulse toward the acquisition of power—and more specifically, by the desire to obtain and control cultural and material capital within the university. JB's motives in participating in the Third World Strike and his legitimacy in claiming self-determination on behalf of the Third World people are eventually brought into question in Judy's film.

Zooming in on a slip of paper that she picked up near the Sather Gate of UC Berkeley, Judy's camera shows a flyer with words in bold writing "Support the Self-Determination of Third World People!!!" Below it is printed a raised black fist. As the camera pans to the picket line, there is JB leading the Third World Liberation Front, demanding special treatments with three goals that are directly related to the university's allocation of capital: first, "the recruitment of Third World people into positions of power"; second, "special admission and financial aid for Third World people"; and third, "Third World people controlling Third World programs" (133). As is obvious from the final goal, the Liberation Front is not agitating for liberation for all the people in the Third World as it claims, but demanding that the university redistribute resources and cultural capital to the protestors. Though whiteness is absent in this scene, its presence is

announced by the power to own (the metamorphosis of whiteness) that the Front leaders want. As Susan Koshy reminds us, whiteness takes many guises, including “subject effects”—the illusions of possessing white privilege by acting white. Koshy further specifies that “the emergence of the resistant Asian American political subjects of the 1960s” is a reverse articulation of the “subject effects” issued by whiteness (165). By clamoring for self-determination, the resisting subjects of color are not necessarily disarticulating the white power structure but rather demanding to be empowered by it. Their resistant subjectivity is a re-articulation of white subjectivity because it is pronounced in repulsion against, and at the same time, in attraction towards, the desirability of white subjectivity. Seen from this light, the Third World protest leader’s demand in the scene for “a third world college” and “third world control of third world programs” here (133) are telling instances of his aspiration to be equipped with white subjectivity, more specifically that privileged power to own, that which defines white subjectivity in the history of law.

The collaboration between the Liberation Front and whiteness comes out like a slip of the tongue during a chorus of chanting. The image of the Third World as an allegiance of non-white people foregrounded by the image of the black fist on the flyer is inconsistent with that vocalized by the group slogans. Captured amidst the chanting, Judy’s film offers up a snapshot of it as follow:

I’m Brown and I’m proud!	Student Organizer
I’m Brown and I’m proud!	Crowd
I’m Red and I’m proud!	Student Organizer

Crowd

I'm Red and I'm proud!

Student Organizer

So let's hear it for my people! I'm yellow and I'm proud!

Crowd

I'm yellow and I'm proud!

Student Organizer

I'm white and I'm proud!

Crowd

I'm white and I'm proud!

(someone) Uh, uh, I ain't white. Do I look white?

(another) One drop, man, one drop's all it takes. You got a drop. Don't you say you don't.

Student Organizer

I'm bourgeoisie and I'm proud!

Crowd

(laughter with sporadic yells and hoots) I'm bourgeoisie and I'm proud. (134-5)

The humor in these exchanges arrest the discrepancy between what Third Worldism means and how it is practiced outside of "Third World" countries, in this case, on the Berkeley campus. According to the chant, the "Third World" is an imagined community comprised of a coalition of people from all races and classes. The irony of such conceptualization is that it equates experiences of black, Asian, Indian, and white peoples in the US as one and the same, while the "Third World" actually refers to underdeveloped countries without reference to their alignment to communist or anti-communist powers. By encapsulating the student activists' confusion, Judy's film warns the audience the danger of the logic of instantiation and the slippages that it will create. As evidenced by the chants "I am white and I am proud"; "I am bourgeoisie and I am proud"; the Third Worldism practiced by the student activists is mistaken. Third World becomes nothing more than an empty signifier, a deceptive practice whose ultimate aim is the claiming of cultural capital, not the bringing about of material change. As the next scene shows, the

students' empty campaign is destined to fail because it takes no account for the historical dynamics that determine the living reality of Asian/American peoples.

JB's false equivocations between racial experiences continue to undo attempts at achieving solidarity within the Asian/ America community. Depicted by the documentary in a later scene is JB claiming himself to be the spokesperson of the Japantown community, flaunting his anti-capitalist ethos of Third Worldism against the development company representing the Nihonmachi renovation, which eventually leads to the fallout between the JTC (Japantown Collective) and the CANE (Citizens Against Nihonmachi Evictions).

Speaking on behalf of the whole Japanese American community, JB marches into the Western Additional Redevelopment Administration Office, and self-righteously launches onto a dignified diatribe against the company, terming it as a capitalist opportunist co-opting the Japanese community, and the second coming of American imperialism's eviction of Japanese Americans. Confused by JB's complaint, the WARA office cites a census they obtained from another Japanese American organization, Nihonmachi Community Development Corporation; in response, WARA charges JB with causing unnecessary confusion and divisiveness in the community through his tearing down of the eviction notices posted by WARA to inform the Nihonmachi tenants.

This scene shows JB imposing his anti-development decisions upon the rest of the Nihonmachi community, instantiating his radical Marxist politics as a defining trait for all Asian Americans without consent. Judy's documentary presents the following intense argument between JTC and CANE, further divulging the multiplicity of sometimes

conflicting interests encompassed by the single label of Japanese American (and for that matter, Asian American).

The layout of the scene is of particular interest: Yamashita represents a singularity of multiplicity among the members of the two groups first by subsuming all of their speeches under the label of “members,” and then supplementing it with an addendum next to it; in brackets, the addendum says “(speaking variously)” (161).

Indeed, “speaking variously” in the meeting, the CANE members accuse the JTC members of reifying a falsely radical image for the group that makes it difficult for them to recruit new members. One of the CANE members says, “when certain members blocked the merchants’ plan for a low-cost housing and retail space. Supporters were criticized for promoting capitalism. Has anybody considered that the merchants need their business to survive?” (161). From JB’s Third Worldist perspective all businesses are inherently bad, so any redevelopment plans—despite how low-cost they may be—should be sabotaged. Although JTC and CANE share office space and an overlapping membership base, that does not prevent them from breaking apart. At one moment during the meeting, a JTC member labels CANE members as “narrow nationalists” with a myopic focus on interests that are bound to local Japanese Americans’ concerns. To that complaint, a CANE member responds, saying: “CANE is not an arm of JTC” (162); that member then proceeds to ask JB whether he wants “Nihomachi to remain a Japanese ghetto, or an all-races, low-income neighborhood?” This burning question leaves everyone in silence, a silence that eventually concludes the meeting. The next morning, JB leads JTC members in removing all of their office equipment out of their borrowed

space from *CANE* on 1772 Sutter. “Recorded Live in Your Face” abruptly ends without reaching any neat conclusions. The final scene shows JB lashing out at the camera, telling Judy to cut the filming. When that scene concludes, “the credits rise over the San Francisco Nihonmachi night” (164) with the final statement: saying “this film is dedicated to the memory of Edmund Yat Min Lee” (164). If “Chinatown: Verité” is Judy’s call for action: exhorting the audience to see the ways the racist policies of US capitalism place Asian immigrants and their descendants in physical danger, then “Recorded Live in Your Face” further depicts capitalism’s production and subversion of Asian/American political movements, by pointing out that capital, both cultural or monetary, is that which structures, separates, and connects Asian/Americans.

Through the script of Judy’s documentary, Yamashita’s novel tells a cautionary tale about capitalism as the basis of Asian/Americans heterogeneity. That cautionary tale centers on JB’s uncritical embrace of a zero-sum form of in-group activism which, by encouraging his denunciations of Asian/Americans who are also marginalized by capitalism, turns him into capitalism’s auxiliary. The “subject effect” (Koshy 165)—with its promise of white privileges like money and power—encourages him to sell out his professors and to starve Japantown of the renovations it needs. JB’s persistence in demanding that all people of color unquestioningly embrace a universal Third World politics regardless of their context repeats the violence of capitalist abstraction by assuming that every person of color ought to want to be an ideal militant Third Worlder, as he does. The extremity and ideological purity of JB’s message presupposes the necessity of an in-group conflict – but what JB does not realize is that this conflict will

only allow white hegemony to consolidate its power. Judy's film illustrates this last point by taking a participant-observer perspective in her shadowing of JB as he moves between multiple Asian/American activist groups and comes into unproductive conflict with all of them.

By combining film script and fiction, "Recorded Live in Your Face" allows Yamashita to remediate the Asian/American Movement in terms of the capitalist real. The scripts in these scenes dwell on a multiplicity of personalities and organizations that capitalism has engendered within the Asian/American Movement, whose interiority has gone unnoticed in fictional prose. JB is a type that the camera of "Recorded Live in Your Face" has uncovered: the dramas he ceaselessly foments illustrate how the ego-driven will to power of many a charismatic leader can overwhelm the ideals of Third World solidarity, and pit people of color against each other, instead of against the oppressive force of white hegemony.

- **"1977"**

In contrast to "1969," the "1977" chapter of *I-Hotel* offers a more hopeful account of Asian/American activism: it acknowledges of Asian/Americans' present situated-ness within capitalism, and offers an alternative to capitalism's mandate to compete, one which will put Asian/American coalitional politics to work for the "greater good" of the people of San Francisco (605). In other words, the chapter argues that Asian/Americans need to engage in what Min Hyoung Song calls "the ethics of generosity," which is defined by excessive action, ambition, and affect. In describing the tenants' and protestors' generosity, "1977," particularly in the subsection of "August 3 1977," deploys

what Bewes calls “literariness” (229)– in this case, adjectives and modifiers that capture the tenants displays of class and racial grievances and collective ambition. These lavish descriptions give literary texture to the affective responsiveness needed in the catalyzing and maintenance of a lasting legacy of Asian/American coalition.

Also different from “Chinatown: Verité” and “Recorded Live in Your Face,” where fictional prose is fused with film scripts, “August 3 1977” is a textual remediation of a spectacle; it reads like a montage of scenes that were videotaped by the narrator on the night of the eviction. Worth noting is the non-singularity of the narrator: it is a “we” made up of a group of displaced tenants. Standing alongside documentarians like Judy Eng from “1968” and “1969,” the collective narrator declares in an earlier subsection in “1977” titled “And this will conclude our transmission from the International Hotel” that “[they] had seen and heard and experienced everything as it happened, framing a vision of real event in real time, hearing and watching history happen, holding our machines up to the event with our hearts pounding in our fingers” (587). “August 3 1977” is an account of what the cameras captured, and what went through the photographers and filmmakers’ minds in the face of the demolition.

“August 3 1977” is a supplementary note to the films and photos taken on the eviction night, adding on what the camera can’t encapsulate. In the tenants’ words, the piece contextualizes the International Hotel in “a larger picture” (587), namely, capitalism, which was changing the cityscape of San Francisco. The writing in “August 3 1977” situates the International Hotel and its tenants in relation to capitalism by

positioning them as commodities that stand in for the larger category of objects that the system displaces and discards due to their unprofitability.

The first act that appears in the three-act scene of “August 3 1977” is one of active protest: the narrator says, “in the last hour, we join this great gathering of human bodies our bulwark of flesh surrounding an old brick hotel—materially worthless, symbolically invaluable, yet tonight still the Movement, fortified by passion and stubborn hope. See us collide and congregate, rally our puny human forces for the greater good” (605). What is of note here is the way the pronouncement calls attention to what the Movement is made of: excessive affect (i.e. passion and hope) in the face of imminent failure coupled with material residuum (i.e. the laborers’ flesh and the brickwork of their crumbling residence). Capitalism—that force which pays no attention the will of the poor laborers and insists upon the destruction of the hotel—is imagined here to be a precondition of the Movement. But the very values the system cannot account for are those that undercut it: the laborers’ “stubborn hope” and exuberant willfulness, their excessive insistence that through a shared commitment to the “greater good,” a more just future can be achieved.

For the protestors, excessive affect and ambition is necessary not only in generating but also in preserving the momentum of the anti-eviction movement. Among these excesses, the collective narrator singles out remembrance as the force that can combat the cultural amnesia encouraged by gentrification. On the morning after the building is destroyed, the former tenants “tumble into the gravesite left by its

demolition,” awash in resignation and an optimism that arises stubbornly out from it.

They say:

perhaps our memory may flutter skyward. The City exploding and swirling away from our center—Manilatown, Chinatown Japantown—spinning away with the phallic impressions of the Pyramid and Coit, spanning bridges of Wharf, Bay, and Golden Gate, dotted islands of Alcatraz and Angel, Victorians in soft undulating pastels, the rich green of Park and the endless blue of Bay, away and way and away American. America” (605).

Even destroyed, the International Hotel remains a co-presence in the city. Its suspended particles float like the memories of its former tenants over the Victorian neighborhoods and across Bay. The “literariness” in “August 3 1977” captures the material co-presence of the building at different places at one time: from the Manilatown, to Angel Island, to the Golden Gate Bridge, and all the way across the country. The camera may not be able to discern this phenomenon of co-presence; but the “literariness” of the narration is able to sketch out in words the minute molecules of the hotel, crystalizing the International Hotel mid-air as a suspension at the verge of total disappearance.

Imagination as such becomes as important as memory in the stage of a movement when its physical symbol is destroyed. The tenants continue to say, when the International Hotel is gone:

we may remember, collecting every little memory, all the bits and pieces, into a larger memory, rebuilding a great layered and labyrinth, now imagined, international hotel of many rooms, the urban experiment of a homeless community built to house the needs of temporary lives. And what for what? To resist death and dementia. To haunt a disappearing landscape. To forever embed this geography with our visions and voices. To kiss the past and you good-bye, leaving the indelible spit of our DNA on still moist lips. Sweet, Sour, Salty. Bitter. (605)

The tenants' narration is shot through with nostalgia. But even as it longs for the past, it also forward looking and ambitious, proposing to reassemble the broken pieces from the hotel to build a larger refuge for the city's future generations. Ambitious thoughts and large desires are necessary for the building of a lasting legacy, as necessary for the old tenants as they are to their protégés. The tenants note that the "rebuilding" will help them resist "death and dementia" and "haunt a disappearing landscape" (605). In their seminal work "Public Identity and Collective Memory in US Iconic Photography" Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argue that haunting, as defined by an ongoing engagement with a site of violence, is a "return indicative of society's continued failure to confront responsibility" (188). Seen from this light, the second coming of a new International Hotel will be an alibi that testifies to the past existence of Manilatown. The building's reincarnation as a subsidized housing project, as envisioned by the narrator, would stand in stark contrast to San Francisco's modern skyline of expensive office high rises. Such a contrast would serve as an indictment of the city's rapid gentrification, which ended up displacing Asians immigrants from their neighborhoods, and would further indict the government for failing to achieve housing justice for its residents. For the tenants, imagining the International Hotel's reconstruction in the face of its disappearance is as much of an exercise in self-healing as it is a task of political protest that holds the government and the developers accountable for their wrongs, the first step towards redress.

In sum, "August 3 1977" acknowledges the immaterial excesses that are necessary to, but often go unrecognized in, community work. To generate this

community-binding excess, extravagance is necessary in action, thought, and feeling to overcome the pre-condition of competition that capitalism produced and produces in Asian/America. By incorporating this into the ending of *I Hotel*, a project on which Yamashita lavished more than ten years and over 800 pages, the author reinforces the messages that generosity is the alternative ethic in the age of capitalism which mines the contradictions within the system. Generosity is a principle that make capitalism perverse: it lauds the excessive behavior of giving more than that is asked for in an atmosphere of austerity, providing variability and heterogeneity in a system that produces and consumes monotony and homogeneity. Generosity is therefore a potent counterweight to the logic of abstraction that capitalism runs on, and is especially essential in cross-class and pan-ethnic coalition building. Generosity is the lever by which capitalism can be turned to undermine itself, turning the competitive bonds that, under capitalism, so often define relations between individuals into connections by channeling what would have been competitive energy into a chosen cause. This vision of activism may sound like the activism of the Third World Protestors, but generous radical action does not seek to concentrate power in the hands of individual actors, especially not domineering heteropatriarchal actors like JB, whose leadership was thoroughly discredited by his attempts to turn the non-profit coalitions he helmed into self-promotional, hierarchal ventures, in which all the other protestors chant like him, think like him, and submit to his political priorities. Compared to JB, the hotel tenants in “1977” offer a cooperative, non-hierarchical model of activism. They direct their collective effort to forging a future that is conducive to the survival of the next generations of disenfranchised people. Their

practical, ecumenical aims mark another difference with JB; they seek to help people in San Francisco across racial, class, occupational, and generational lines. Visions like theirs offer an essential model for catalyzing a lasting coalition in the capitalist age which requires organizers' wise retooling of capitalist relations for non-profit use. And generosity appears to be the first step in such undertaking.

Just as generosity is “a making monstrous” (Song 283) of capitalism, Yamashita's voluminous novel is a “making monstrous” of the realist novel. Her large book adheres to and defies literary orthodoxies. The multiplicity of images that emerges from her hybridization of prose, scripts, and cinematic effects pays back in the form of the time-images of an Asian/America coalition that is oscillating and proliferating in the readers' mind as if it is a living organism that is sometimes growing and other times regressing. The book's hybridity offers a sensible entry into imagining that: it re-distributes the readers' senses as it deploys texts that are laid out linearly, non-linearly, and any ways in between, to paint pictures and stage dramas in the readers' minds. Sometimes capacious and other times playful, *I Hotel* is an enactment of Asian/American heterogeneity, an attribute that just one genre can't simply convey. Through its hybridization of documentary film and fiction, Yamashita's ambitious novel bears witness to Asian/American heterogeneity, and shows how divisions between people of color might be overcome.

Conclusion

Hybridity enacts heterogeneity. This is the chief aesthetic insight gained from reading “The New Anak” and *I Hotel* as documentary fictions. And as Tagatac and

Yamashita use the textual union of film script and fictional prose to craft non-instantiating representations of Asian/ America, their genre experimentation moves from the realm of representational innovation into the contestation of the materialist dynamics that marginalize and divide people of color in the United States. More specifically, their hybrid enactments of heterogeneity illustrate that Asian/America is conditioned by whiteness under the guise of US citizenship and American capitalism, reminding us that the Asian/America as a group is not by default a leftist alliance formed under the shared condition of racial difference as romanticized by civil rights politics, but a heterogeneous permutation of subjectivities and collectivities bound together by relational stratification and reactions against it. These representations further emphasize the central role of intersectionality between race and class in the formation of Asian/America. By caking the stratified relation visible in their racial representations, Yamashita and Tagatac map the logic of capitalist abstraction onto the representational logic of the camera. Tagatac shows the camera's limitation by interleaving his script of a documentary film about the manongs with prose flashbacks of their past; his analogy between the camera and capitalism argues for the complexity of Asian/American subjectivity and collectivity as something that is within and beyond the determination of capitalism, a picture that is larger than what conceptual abstraction can fathom, more than what a camera can frame. On the other hand, Yamashita takes her hypothetical camera to represent the liveliness, tension, and contradiction that capitalism has created inside racial enclaves to demonstrate that Chinatown, Manilatown, and Japantown are not the static place that they appear to be in many a movie set, but real places with people living and working in them.

Tagatac's and Yamashita's hybrid mode of representation also complicates the pat conclusion that the protests around and symbolism of the International Hotel fostered unity. My analysis of the "The New Anak" and *I Hotel* reveals that the movement to preserve the International Hotel was defined as much by disunity as by unity. According to the ethnographer Estella Habal, the tenant's expulsion was the indirect result of "ultra-leftist" activists' refusal to "work with any officials," including the then progressive City Mayor George Moscone, who proposed that the city Housing Authority seize the hotel via eminent domain and then sell it to the manongs. The radical protestors, in turn, would surely tell a very different story about the ultimate cause of the hotel's demolition. The Asian/American collectivity depicted in "The New Anak" and *I Hotel* was not a chapter of history in which oppressed people spoke in unison as popular imagination of it made it out to be (Habal 88-90). Images of group coherence and dissonance in *I Hotel* and "The New Anak" reflect that fact: they shatter our romanticization of an Asian/American unity; but, as Tagatac's and Yamashita's work shows, arising from fragments of that shattering is a cluster of non-instantiating representations of Asian/America, remediating the anti-eviction movement from a foreclosed civil disobedience campaign to a process of activism that is still ongoing. If documentary fiction is a hybrid genre that mixes facts with fictions as Foley and Flis describe, reflecting the history of late capitalism's decentering effects and the American Sixties' decentered political and economic outlook, then, Asian/American documentary fiction is defined by all of that, even as it manages to speak beyond it, renewing our sense of the past with narratives that are capable of changing capitalist history. Tagatac and Yamashita offer a vision of change that is neither

post-apocalyptic nor messianic, a vision that stands in marked contrast to the views of JB and other radical protest leaders. “The New Anak” and *I Hotel* imagine resistance not as a wholesale abandonment of capitalism, but as a gradual subversion of its habit of casting Asian/Americans aside through an accumulation and appropriation of (im)material excess for strategic use. This strategy is called generosity; its political efficacy is shown in these works by characters reflexive of our predecessors who have taken the lead in collective survival and subversion by mining capitalism’s contradictions.

Rather than closing my project with a summative conclusion, I wish to end by gesturing toward forms of affiliation between Asian-raced bodies and unexpected others. If, indeed, capitalism’s contradictions have given rise to a radical Asian American legacy, then, what my reading of science fictions below suggests is that this radicalism may remain a part of the community even in Asian American realities that have little in common with Asian America as it has existed over the last fifty years.

If my analysis in this chapter is correct that Yamashita’s attention to the visual in her documentary fiction is an index of her discursive capital critique, then her science fictional play about Siamese twins viscerally confronts her readers with the cleaving which the process of capital abstraction wrought on the Asian body. What is felt by those experiencing these split identities—even in an Asian America where they are supposedly free of discrimination—is a sense of alienation by and dependent upon capitalism; it is a feeling that Jeffrey Santa Ana calls “ancestral feeling,” a dialectical affective oscillation “between the celebratory color blindness of racial mixture in global commerce on the one hand, and cultural memory in the empathetic and often painful identification with

heritage and genealogy on the other” (qtd. in Day and Frtiz 459). The hybrid Asian-raced bodies’ ancestral feelings in Yamashita’s *Siamese Twins and Mongoloids: Three Abstractions on Asian America* therefore point back to the inseparability between global capitalism and the formation of Asian America. I will further explore ancestral feeling in the second half of the coda with Laurence Yep’s “Selchey Kids.” At the end of the short story, Duke, the Asian-raced, trans-species “dolpinus sapiens,” comes to an epiphany that survival in precarious times involves working creatively and adaptively with what resources one has. I argue that Duke’s story can be read as a parable of Asian America’s entanglement in existing world systems including capitalism and the environment.

Coda

The novelty of Asian America is best encapsulated by Karen Tei Yamashita's science fictional play *Siamese Twins and Mongoloids: Three Abstractions on Asian America* published in *Anime Wong: Fictions of Performance* (2014). Set in the year of 1971, and in the cognitively estranging place of "Asian America (*where's that?*)," the play's first act titled "Abstraction 1: Dramatic Theater—Hyphenated Dreams" centers on a conversation between Ah Gee—paper name of Sung Chiang (one of the 108 outlaw heroes from the 14th century Chinese author Shi Nai'an's masterpiece *Water Margin*)—and a customer of his delicatessen, which, as we will find out later, is one of those roasted duck and barbeque pork restaurants one finds in Chinatown. The act as a whole lacks action. The only action taking place is Ah Gee's violent cleaving of roasted ducks while commiserating with the customer about the "schizophrenic" (265) identities of their Asian American children, whose psyches, as the two say, are just as split as the two halves of the roasted ducks. From the conversation, the audience/reader, furthermore, finds out that Ah Gee has five sets of Siamese twins: they respectively go by the names of "Charlie Chan-#1 Son," "Mao-Confucius," "Green Hornet-Kato," "Captain Kirk-Mr. Zulu," and "Fu Manchu-Dragon Lady." These children never appear on stage. In fact, it is only by the end that we are told they have all left home, "sneaking around with their split personalities" (265), leaving Ah Gee behind with his roasted ducks on the skewers, hanging. Concluding this one-page act is the whimsical narration from the chorus, pleading the audience/reader to indulge in their imagination to picture Ah Gee embarking on a journey to bring "each paired progeny" home. Ah Gee's odyssey to come is

described by the chorus as “in itself... a search for Asian America” (265), a pursuit for a (non)place whose location—as suggested by the parenthetical question appended to it, “*where’s that?*”—remains to be a mystery.

Ah Gee’s search, in a sense, is symbolic of what this dissertation has been doing: looking for Asian America. I begin my coda with Yamashita’s “fiction of performance,” which, according to her interview with *Amerasia*, was written to provoke thoughts rather than to be performed because it offers some new grounds to theorize the social formation of the community that goes beyond the national boundary and the Anthropocene.¹⁸ The metaphor of Asian America as a non-place and the comparison of Asian Americans to the figure of craniopagus twins—a figure that has been historically treated as subhuman—provide one more re-entry point into thinking about Asian America and the Asian American identity as “novums,” born out of the civil rights movement in the Long Sixties. Yamashita’s “science-fictionemes” (Chu 68) boldly mimic the novelty of Asian America and the Asian American identity with fictional space and hybrid characters that literalize their artificiality and psychological idiosyncrasy.

I will gesture at another “high intensity” realist narrative type that captures another image of the cognitively estranging Asian America. Here, I apply the four organizing concepts in each of the preceding chapters—family, land, capitalism and mystery—to speculate about the possibility of a more broadly realized Asian America. Taking advantage of the abstract nature of Asian America and its manifestation in

¹⁸ For the full interview (2010), read <http://www.amerasiajournal.org/blog/?p=250>.

relational terms, I am taking an Asian American science fictional approach to the analysis.

Yamashita's and Laurence Yep's speculative work provides a fantastical and in no way less real image of Asian America as a formation that is not yet here but has aspects that look oddly familiar to what is seen in our current world. Lateral in its formation, Asian America as a planetary assemblage, as I will show, continues to rely on capitalism and more curiously on human-animal intimacy in its continuous process of evolution. I am evoking the term planetary here in the way that Wai Chee Dimock does it in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. There, Dimock describes *planetary* as an "unknown quantum, barely intimated, not yet adequate to the meaning we would like to bear and precisely stirring for that reason" (5). I evoke Dimock's terms precisely because of its imaginative yet material quality. *Siamese Twins and Mongoloids* and "The Selchey Kids" exemplify a planetary version of Asian America. Be it the "Asian America (*where's that?*)" in "Abstraction 1," Gardena in "Abstract 2," the Asian American studies classroom in "Abstraction 3," or New Milpitas in "Selchey" these places represent a time and place where the goal of the Asian American Movement is achieved, when Asian Americans are provided for and free (however temporary) from racism and discrimination. Feeling at home in these places are the split superhuman, subhuman, and student bodies. With them, Yamashita and Yep create post-racial scenarios that take us to a fantasy flight in the imagination of what would become of Asian Americans when race is no longer an impairment.

Yamashita and Yep transport us to those mysterious terrains through the familiar vessel of root redemption narrative that is typical in the Asian American sub-genre of returnee/adoptee memoir when Asian American subjects go back to the supposed home land in Asia to obtain identity authentication. Yamashita's and Yep's science fiction is different not only because they are fused with family/home searching narrative elements, but also because they treat the locale of home distinctively: rather than presenting a concrete home resided in the past like a place of birth that will solve the mystery of the identity of the searchers, these science fictions present us with a (non)place that exists in literally nowhere or anywhere. Yamashita's and Yep's science fictional world in turn signify the split Asian American identity on illusive ground, suggesting that perhaps Asian America can be found everywhere because it is not so much of a settlement but a permanently make shift sociality.

Yamashita's "Abstraction 2: Television Sitcom—*Dentaloptics*" presents us with an example of such flimsy space: surrounding our protagonist, the Hamada twins's Dentaloptic clinic are "Japanese gardens with perfect Dichondra lawns and lollipop bushes" (269). According to the voiceover, the Hamada boys were born "in the Mid-Sixties" to "a sansei couple in Gardena, California... known as Asian American movement radicals who had made a conscientious decision to live and work in the community"; they worked to "raise and educate their boys to epitomize the very perfection of Asian America" (269). In the science fictional Gardena, terms like "oriental" and "Siam" are considered "*passé*" (269); people refer to Heco and Okada Hamada as "The Asian American duo." But even in a politically correct utopia like

Gardena, money is still an issue. Utopic Asian America is imagined to be separable from the political flourishing of the duo and their people. This point is ludicrously emphasized in the play, when the twin's naked appearance "in the Asian American Male Calendar 19—" initially scandalized their father Warren Heco who is running for office, but ended up funding his reelection campaign.

By the end of the play, Warren reports that the twins' pinup calendar "sold like hot cakes" and even "the Nisei vets bought it" (279); the calendar's second edition is now "endorsing [his] reelection" (279). As a whole "Abstraction 2" projects a new and improved version of Asian America, where Asian American laborers are doctors and models (as opposed to menial laborers and railroad track layers). What stays in Yamashita's speculative utopia is the persistence of capitalism in the formation of Asian America.

The entanglement between capitalism and the leftist politics (that which gave birth to Asian America in the first place) becomes more complicated in "Abstraction 3: Mike Kato." "Abstraction 3" is not a science fiction but reads more like a campus drama. The context of the university—though not the science-fictional Gardena and "Asian American (*where's that?*)"—still manages to mediate Asian America with some enhanced realist intensity.

"Abstraction 2" contextualizes "Abstraction 3" as a "situation comedy," a show that Professor Kato screened to his Asian American Studies students. If, as Mark Chiang argues, the university is where the coalitional Asian America is born, then it is not an exaggeration to say that it is also the homebased for the community. Worth noting is how

divided the institution is. Especially in the Asian American Studies classroom, the student body is divided by the labels of “Asian” and “non-Asian.” In the scene, the non-Asians confess that they are here because they feel like they are either culturally Asian or they want to meet Asian girls. More schisms actually take place within the group of Asian students: one student wonders why they are wasting tuition on studying split identities in college; the other responds, because “it’s a racist jungle out there what we learn here is survival skill” (287). That opinion is only to be rebutted by another student saying that racism does not matter so long as you have money—just as the story of the Siamese twins’ shows, despite bodily and racial difference, they went on to owning plantations, slaves and marrying white women.

The debate between capitalist post-racialism and identity politics in the lecture hall ended with another student exchange: one student asked “But what if you arrive with nothing; you are undocumented, an exile or refugee...with tuition cost going up, I’m going to have to drop out” (287). To that, an anonymous student shouts back, “Don’t worry, they will get an international student to pay a triple ride.” The TA in the class, NANKI-POO then felt called out because he now realizes he is “one of those who payed tripled ride” (287). This moment is telling because it is synecdochic of Asian America. Almost like a rejoinder of chapter 4, this scene reminds us that even when the utopic Asian America takes place, class inequality will inevitable be part of it; stratification will split Asian America into two halves, namely rich and poor. “Abstraction 3” shows that some Asians (like NANKI-POO) will have to pay out to contribute to the operation of the overall community. By homing in on economic inequality in the supposed Asian

America, “Abstraction 3”—along with the rest of *Siamese Twins and Mongoloids*—reminds us, the audience/reader, of the need to take intersectionality and inter-relationality into account when bringing the (non)place of Asian America to being.

Lauren Yep’s “The Selchey Kids” (1969) imagines another type of planetary Asian America, this time in an inter-species form. Though we are not told the race of the protagonist Deucalion (Duke), he is raced Asian by the details in and structure of the narrative. Very much like an adoptee, Duke does not find out his real identity until after the apocalypse hits California, when the San Andreas Fault Line breaks, and the entire state “slided” (216) into the Pacific Ocean. Duke is one of the few who made it to a hill top when the “big tidal wave” came (216). But the majority of California and its residents was drowned: as he recalls “family, friends, and even identity were lost in barely half an hour” (221). He flees to the Midwest to avoid dealing with the aftermath of the catastrophe until the day that, tired of the corn field and the apple pie that his aunt made, he decides to head towards the Pacific again. Seeing the familiar sight of his home state transformed into a wasteland with the “City” (which seems to be Los Angeles) submerged by the “Deep Ocean” (222), Duke feels profoundly estranged: he says “I fought the alien touch, welcomed the earth and no more, preserving my remaining identity” (223). Sitting at the “splintered Warf” Duke ponders “What was I? Then answer: by my nature I am 1) a substance, 2) living, 3) sentient, 4) rational, and I belong to the species of Man” (222). This internal monologue is worth quoting in full because it shows that the Great San Andreas earthquake created a life-altering experience for Duke to self-estrangle and re-evaluate his identity, even as it functions as a metaphorical device

for the author himself to reflect on who Asian Americans were in 1969, the year when the identity category of Asian American was first announced.

The word “alien” in the context above could be Yep’s discursive method to code Duke as “Asian-raced”—hearkening back to the phrase “aliens ineligible for citizenship” in the California Alien Land law of 1913—and Duke’s affirmation of himself as “sentient” and “rational” may also be Yep’s re-humanization of the Asian body, which has been treated as mechanic and robotic since the 19th century, most saliently in the immediate wake of the 1965 Immigration Act when the stereotype that is exacerbated by the increasing amount of immigrants from Asia with expertise in technologies granted entry into the country. “I have no identity, only the inheritance of my humanity” as Duke continues. His realization of his own incomplete identity occasions the narrative’s surprise revelation. While working for Uncle Noe—his boss at the Institute of Marine—Duke recovers “a report for the Board of Directors upon Crossbreeding Experiment No. 103” in which he is stated as an experimental outcome of “Director Noe Selchey’s spermatozoa and a dolphin ovum carefully developed by radiation” (234). That scientific experimentation made him a “*dolphinus sapiens*” (233). This finding redraws the genealogy of kinship for Duke: Dr. Gunnar whom he took as his biological father has actually been playing the role of adopted father the whole time. His new-found kinship with cetaceans comforts him in the deserted, post-apocalyptic California by situating him in a new network of inter-species belonging: positioning him along the bloodline of Ollie and Ossie (two dolphins) making the “jelly-like sac” “fifteen feet” tall “three clumps of tentacles” his brother.

The story ends with Duke reflecting on the value of experimentation as a necessary part of the course of evolution: he says “man lives in the context of nature. He plays by the rule of the game but unlike other creatures, he can manipulate the game by changing the rules. Each alteration requires man to adjust again to new game, and on and on, ad infinitum” (240). Duke’s epiphany crystallizes one of the defining themes of this dissertation project: that “changing the rules”—sliding through and between forms—is the way that Asian American radicalism lives on, particularly in times of crisis when we share the common condition of financial and environmental precarity with other peoples and species.

By ending my project with a reading of “Selchey” which I argue is a science fiction as much as it is a root redemption narrative and an expedition story, I hope to suggest that American artists and activists are tasked to negotiate with and at times subvert existing institutional rules and structures, because it is only then that we can affect change. Given our community’s dependence on other national, ethnic, racial, generational groups and even species, and its entanglement with existing cultural, eco, and capital systems, our radical vision has to be mutually beneficial and socially and environmentally sustainable.

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Appendix



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11