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Motions of Search:  
A Korean/American Epistemology

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

Anthony Yooshin Kim

Committee in charge:

Professor Zeinabu irene Davis, Co-Chair  
Professor Luis Martin-Cabrera, Co-Chair  
Professor Dennis R. Childs  
Professor Page duBois  
Professor K. Wayne Yang

2016

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Co-Chair

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Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

## DEDICATION

The Korean poet Ko Un once wrote:

*To us already a birth place is no longer our home.  
The place we were brought up is not either.  
Our history, rushing to us through fields and hills is our home.*

This dissertation is written for those whose rush of histories  
I always carry in the dusk of my flesh and the light of my dreams  
no matter where I am and where I go:

My parents, Jim and Sook Young Kim, whose labor and love have made the  
very alchemy of my existence possible

and

My *Halmoni*, Yoo Bock Hee (1923-2008), whose winter passage to *haneul-nara* I  
will mourn for the rest of my days.

Thank you in ways that go beyond the horizon of all the words I know,  
*in Korean and in English.*

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If this dissertation is about a methodology of motion, a motion of search, and all the madness one is bound to encounter in-between, then I must stall for gratitude the progression of space-time to express my deepest thanks to all the fellow travelers who have guided me towards the infinite possibilities of movement along the way.

I've been truly blessed to cross paths and work with some tremendous teachers and liberators of minds during my "long and winding road" through grad school. First, I'd like to acknowledge Professors Sarita See, Vicente Diaz, Andrea Smith, Nadine Naber, and Maria Cotera who met me during my first year as a Ph.D. in Michigan and always pushed me to find the political critique and urgency in my words. Although my time spent with all of you was brief, I still carry those early visions of what a "Critical Ethnic Studies" project should be in all my thinking and writing. At UCSD, I assembled not only a committee but a true coalition. To Professors Page duBois, Dennis Childs, K. Wayne Yang, Luis Martin-Cabrera, and Zeinabu irene Davis, my thanks a thousand times over. Page, you spurred a free expression of ideas and forms from my very first seminar to my final defense – not to mention those two confusing yet cherished quarters of independent study that we, along with Niall, embarked on through the thousand plateaus of Deleuze and Guattari. Dennis, what can I say? The passion, rigor, and commitment you bring to your intellectual and political work is without parallel and transgresses all borders. You remind me to keep dreaming and fighting for



revolutionary change *by any and all means necessary*. Wayne, you were there from the beginning of my journey in San Diego and have seen me through some of the best and most difficult seasons of my life. You are truly my MVP when I envision the kind of person I want to be in and out of the classroom. Luis, you met me one afternoon in Spring 2012, and being an acute observer of my intensity, passion, and rage, simply said, *yes* – to political, intellectual, and spiritual growth – and challenged me to embrace the complexities of myself and to rise above. And finally, Professor Zeinabu, it is no understatement to say that I cannot even imagine the human being – let alone scholar – I would be today without you. When I walked into your production class over two years ago, I'd lost my way, but your tough and tender mentorship took me from being just another “talented ruin” to a full-fledged Ph.D. I can only hope that my work – present and future – will do you justice.

Now, as a true child of the '90s, the rest of this is going to sound like a series of cheesy yearbook shout-outs, so cue the Boyz II Men and start slow dancing. To Sharon Heijin Lee and Dean Saranillio, both of you prove that blood may be thicker than water but soju beats them all (especially when there's noraebang involved!). Heijin-*noona*, an extra thank you for always looking out for me – in spite of my “dramas and traumas” – from the Midwest to Korea to California to New York. Josen Diaz: from Summer Bridge to infinity, you are everlasting love. Jay Perez: for helping me see it's about the people, never the institution. Thanks to us, 2Tongues will never die! R.J. Lozada: for a visual-political agility and agitation that inspire me, and yes, that shot will always reminds me of Ozu. Mark Padoongpatt, Gloria Wong,

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brilliance pushes me to be better. Rosiangela Escamilla, Gibran Guido, and Niall Twohig: for a decolonial poetics rooted in a “nostalgia for the light,” I need new constellations to express how all of you helped me survive this “low intensity hell.” Rosi, *especially*, you are the Frida to my Fanon, we are the “ratchet of the earth.” Theresa Navarro and Pahole Sookkasikon: as the wisdom and love to my rage, one day we’ll go back and rule the East Bay as Asian American all-stars! Amanda Solomon Amorao and Andrew Amorao: for helping this Korean American keep a full heart and stomach and *imagine otherwise*. The Santo Niño has double-duty presiding over my *han*. Jimiliz Valiente-Neighbours: my sister and seeker of nourishment, growth, and a love supreme. Joje Marie Reyes-Alonzo or “OMG JOJ!”: my best friend who has seen me through all my evolutions. In the time it took me to get this, you got a Masters, a job, a house, a couple of kids, and probably a secret formula on how to keep eating without ever feeling full. You’ve pushed me to be the very best self that I can be, so long as I “just suck it up, and do it!” Thanks for being friends, comrades, and *chosen family*.

And finally, to my blood family – *Appa, Omma*, Monica, and our German Shepherd, Max. Perhaps you’ll never read these words, but I hope through my actions, you’ll see what I have put down on the following pages come to life. Thank you for teaching me how to be deliberate and fearless with my dreams, to embrace my hunger to see a wider world – wider than the edges of your lives and wider than even my own. To quote the late Donny Hathaway, “I love you in a place where there’s no space or time... and I’m singin’ this song to you.”

## VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Motions of Search:  
A Korean/American Epistemology

by

Anthony Yooshin Kim

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Zeinabu irene Davis, Co-Chair  
Professor Luis Martin-Cabrera, Co-Chair

*Motions of Search: A Korean/American Epistemology* is a transdisciplinary and transmedia project that presents a kinetic exploration and application of visual documentary practices through a synthetic model of critical theory, creative writing, (auto)ethnography, and film production. *Motions* interrogates the visual, historical, and epistemological contexts and structures of the documentary work of three filmmakers – Charles Burnett, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Jy-Ah Min. While emerging from discrepant histories and geographies, academic pathways and artistic traditions, this trio share a political and aesthetic orientation with narratives that exist outside the realm of *official documentations* of history, culture, and society. I am particularly interested in

how they appropriate and intervene on documentary *not as a stable genre and tradition but as a contingent form and practice* that constantly evolves in response to historical moments of crisis and transformation. Turning away from the mass-produced and state-sanctioned spectacles designed by and for “the technologies of hypervisibility... [that posit] that everything is available and accessible for consumption,” these filmmakers turn into the forgotten, maligned, or trivialized scenes and subjects of everyday life from the 1970s to the contemporary moment.<sup>1</sup>

My chapters look at the filmmakers and their work, examining documentary in three registers: (1) the narrative form and the aesthetics of *sur-realism* in Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977); (2) the essay form and the aesthetics of improvisation in Jean-Pierre Gorin’s *Letter to Jane* (1972) and *Ici et Ailleurs* (1972), as well as his solo *My Crazy Life* (1992); and (3) the experimental form and the aesthetics of remix in Jy-Ah Min’s *M/F Remix* (2010). My conclusion then offers an assemblage of critical and creative reflections on making my documentary film-in-progress about my mother and her difficult recovery from battling multiple cancers. These sections can be read as a series of case studies or dispatches that build in succession, both in terms of my discussion of specific documentary film texts and contexts, material practices and aesthetic ideologies, as well as my implementation of hybrid, shifting modes of formal address and techniques.

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Gordon. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16.

Introduction:

*Purpose of Journey, Emigration*  
*Visible Peculiarities, One*



Figure 1.1: Reprocessed Stills from *All Love is Immigrant: Halmoni 1973* (2009-2011)

*Prelude*

All love is immigrant.  
 -Ed Bok Lee, *Real Karaoke People*

Tell me the story  
 Of all these things.  
 Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us.  
 -Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

Write yourself into existence.  
 -Annual Writing Prompt

The 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2008: a morning that begins like any other, a Wednesday of seeming inconsequence half-submerged in the snowfall of six months of bitter Midwestern winter during my yearlong pilgrimage, my solitary sojourn, to Ann Arbor, Michigan. I am driving through the freshly plowed roads back to my sparsely furnished apartment from the small Korean market across town, at the cusp of a quarter century and lost in the heartland of an America so many fathoms away from my family beyond the oceanic glow of boxed visions from a Hollywood movie or TV screen. My headphones plugged into a cross-country mobile phone call with my grandmother, *Halmoni*, I am amusing her with a dispersion of details from a graduate seminar paper I am writing on a recent film adaptation of the classic pansori (Korean folk opera), *Chunhyang*, by the South Korean director Im Kwon-Taek, the words I pronounce somewhat hesitant and self-mocking, in reach for those that are already reaching past me. Revived (and much revered) many times over, *Chunhyang's* cross-genre, transborder iterations exert an apparitional force over the peninsular flights and fights that stage Korean history and culture. *Chunhyang*, as our titular heroine, is by all accounts the beautiful



daughter of a gisaeng (courtesan) who falls in love with a yangban (elite), Mongryong, and for fear of scandal because of her natal place in the commons, will marry him but only in secret. With Mongryong called away to complete his education as a public magistrate, Chunhyang's great melodrama lies in her refusal to become the mistress of the new governor of the village. Her unwavering fidelity, her devotion to the sanctity of her conjugal vow thus holds her personage in direct contempt of power, subjecting her body to the vicious throes of corporal punishment and captivity by the local aristocracy.

In response to the call of Halmoni's rich, throaty laughter, I am always quick to perform, wailing in affected parody the opening lines of the pansori's famous love song ("Sarang-ga") that I learned from an audio file purchased from iTunes just a few weeks before:

이리 오너라 업고 놀자, 사랑 사랑 사랑 내 사랑이야!  
 (Come here my love, come up and play, my love, my love, you  
 are my love!)

I can hear all 87 years (or 85, based on your sources) of Halmoni ripple and reverb through the wonderment of wireless transmission. She knows this story all too well, especially since she has the particular tale illustrated on a folding screen that adorns one wall of her cramped apartment back in Sunnyvale, CA. This folding screen is the stuff of family legend, traveling from a Seoul under the iron fist of martial law dictatorship to a San Jose under the sway of technological development, along with a 100-year-old wooden chest, countless boxes of photographs, and a wad of money stuffed inside a sock in the foot of a rubber shoe (or perhaps, as later recanted by my father, after the fleetness of her passing, these bills she had so carefully amassed in 10

years as a widow and single mother of five were tucked into the paper stems of silk flowers carried in plain view of customs and immigration officials and bloomed into the mirage of since misplaced American dreams). The last panel of this screen that holds Chunhyang's fate, however, is always folded inward towards the wall by the dining room table for lack of space. Growing up, I would often trace with my small hands from one panel to the next, following the resurrection of Chunhyang's exquisite corpse, and I would wonder: did this then nameless woman so beholden to the gaze of men, be it by their desire to possess her or to imprison her, driven by their passions or their vengeance — did *she* find her own *freedom, happiness, let alone love*? Was she left to rot and ruin in her jail cell? Or did she meet her untimely demise?

*In spite of my boyhood curiosity, I never thought to peek behind.*

By now, I can sense the whispers of breath and smoke that push outwards from the apparent grimness of Halmoni's mouth, a slender cylinder of a Capri or Virginia Slims now stained crimson by her favorite lipstick. Likely, the cartons will sit on the white stone coffee table alongside a brown hand mirror that she uses to peer daily into the demands of her own reflection: the lined forehead, the arch of her tattooed eyebrows, the jet black hair dyed by Bigen powder pulled back into a loose bun. But she breaks the spell of my sentiment (our sentiments will only flow so freely in the inebriated lilt of a song in karaoke), cackling that she cannot believe someone who is borne of *my generation* could actually find any use or value in this "old school" music and performance. The word she uses to brandish the poetic anachronism, the lyric disconnect of my young age and my antediluvian

interest is someone who is of the hyundai era, a word that directly translates to the contours of modern or modernity but also brands a particular and popular mode of vehicular transport. Afterwards, I tell her that I am going to make doenjang jjigae for dinner with the ingredients that are nestled in anticipation on the passenger seat, a hearty soup made of soybean paste, tofu, and vegetables that is part and parcel to the spiritual art and basis of the bapsang, the dinner table around which we all kneel in wait for mutual sustenance, and can evoke, alternately, a Winter's hearth or a maternal warmth. This soup reminds me of Halmoni and in so many ways *is* Halmoni. After ten years of cutting broccoli on an assembly line in a Silicon Valley canning factory, the stirring voltage of her spotted hands took to the sewing and cooking (by way of Jeollanam-do) that held in tenderness and molded with toughness the turbulent weight of my youth in the absence of my parents who went off to work.

Our last exchange on this third to last day of her life is:

*Grandson, I love you.*

*Grandmother, I love you, too.*

For what is left to me – beyond the melancholy inheritance of her 1973 South Korean passport, her Social Security and Visa debit cards, and a few jade rings – is a repetition of verses to be rehearsed so often yet the sounded vessel through which they sail veers off course, against the odds of foreclosure. *Tenth, a circle within a circle, a series of concentric circles.* Our final words are not spoken in the brokenness of my Korean nor are they even in the brokenness of her English. *No*, our final words today are spoken in the strangeness of our

Japanese, a language imposed on her by force and borrowed by me in jest, as the long, drawn out echoes of a colonial history and its waves dancing with a lightness of speed off the shores of our oppositional tongues. *Mago, aishiteimasu. Obachan, aishiteimasu.* Do I feel the gravity of a lamentation for wanting to have spoken in Korean? Or am I transfixed by first the irony and then the pathos for a remembering that is so many times displaced and in search of new shelter, a place to call a land, let alone a home? My hands continue to trace after the unseen panel, yet they do not lead me to what I should feel for this expression of love already bypassed by loss yet diffused by the knowingness of our shared delight. I am left with the partial consolation, a flickering montage of *the memory [that] is the entire. The longing in the fact of the lost.* I can recount how I grew up sleeping next to her on a mat on the living room floor as she watched KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) and TTV (Tokyo Television) interchangeably, how I would expertly mimic the Kikkoman soy sauce commercials from both stations for the family's amusement. I can recount the points of contact, the labyrinths we'd make and explore through our playful banter of jokes and ballads and stories that surround the wavering terms of life and death that bind us forever and separate us for good. It is here that Halmoni and I will find each other without ends, without ever ending, but to face the phantom of one specific end whose promise of release will always deliver.

Just two days later, I find myself alone on the balcony, my phone clenched so tightly in my fist that it threatens to break. My slight frame stands against a glass door left ajar, in defiance of a night wind that threatens to

pierce me: a lone shadow watching the chemistry of cold air and cigarette smoke that rises then disappears towards the darkness of a horizon and a dream where Halmoni now must dwell.

## I.

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.

-Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

*Motions of Search: A Korean/American Epistemology* is a transdisciplinary and transmedia project that presents a *kinetic exploration and application* of documentary practices through a synthetic model of critical theory, creative writing, (auto)ethnography, and film production. Along with a minor archive of passports, identification cards, oral history, and film manifesto, *Motions* offers an itinerant eye that encounters and investigates the visual, historical, and epistemological structures found in the documentary acts and arts of three filmmakers – Charles Burnett, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Jy-Ah Min. While emerging from discrepant histories and geographies, academic pathways and artistic traditions, this trio shares a political and aesthetic orientation with narratives that operate beneath, between, and beyond the *official documentations* of history, culture, and society. I am particularly attuned to how they appropriate and intervene on documentary *as a contingent form and practice* – rather than a *stable tradition and genre* – that constantly evolves in response to historical moments of crisis and transformation – whether it be a working class Black family surviving in the dirt lots of deindustrialization in

South Central Los Angeles in 1973 or Asian Americans adrift in their youth while the War on Terror rages on all around them in San Diego in 2004. Turning away from the mass-produced, state-sanctioned spectacles designed by and for “the technologies of hypervisibility... [that posit] that everything is available and accessible for consumption,” these filmmakers re/collect the forgotten, maligned, or trivialized scenes and subjects of everyday life from the 1970s to the historical present.<sup>1</sup>

My chapters look at the filmmakers and their work, examining documentary in three registers: (1) the narrative form and the aesthetics of *sur-realism* in Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep* (1977); (2) the essay form and the aesthetics of improvisation in Jean-Pierre Gorin’s *Letter to Jane* (1972) and *Ici et Ailleurs* (1972), as well as his solo *My Crasy Life* (1992); and (3) the experimental form and the aesthetics of remix in Jy-Ah Min’s *M/F Remix* (2010). My final unit offers an assemblage of critical and creative reflections on making my documentary film-in-progress about my mother and her difficult recovery from battling multiple cancers. These sections can be read as a series of case studies or dispatches that build in succession, both in terms of my discussion of specific documentary film texts and contexts, material practices and aesthetic ideologies, as well as my implementation of hybrid, shifting modes of formal address and techniques.

My methodology for writing research draws out and puns the linguistic construction of the word itself: *re*-search. In this way, I, like a musician whose

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Gordon. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16.

ear insists on playing free through imaginative lines of flight rather than technical perfection, gather, sample, improvise, deconstruct, and remix from a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks in Marxist theory, decolonial poetics, visual studies, cultural studies, critical ethnic studies, and women of color feminist theory, among others, to meet the demands of the work, rather than a utilitarian insertion of the work into the frameworks. It is a methodology whose (*anti-*)productive energies are fueled by the quantum probability and conditional permutation contained in the dialogical and recurring encounter between research and search, search and research.

My methodology thus privileges a *rigor* that is less about disciplinary compliance and neoliberal competency and more about a commitment to trial and error, to experimentation and failure – or, put another way, my methodology is about “putting things into practice” and even falling in love with an abstraction to the point that one frees it from the safety of theory and grants it the creative risks associated with living. Through the repetition, rehearsal, and *re-*creation this entire process entails, practice can also reveal that by animating what was once thought to be recessed as a class of objects (whether these objects be things that no longer function or human beings who have been stripped of their sentience), objects can take on a rebellious motion and consciousness of their own, playing out of bounds in the space and time of a radical recess.

This healthy skepticism towards the academic dispositions of disciplinarity and methodology is shared by the pathbreaking and performative feminist scholarship of Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s *Woman, Native, Other:*

*Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism*, Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Jackie Orr's *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder*, and Grace M. Cho's *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, to name just a few. All of these scholars call to disciplinary *disorder* the canonical governance of *archive, methodology, and knowledge production*, tackling disparate topics that illuminate historical narratives that are otherwise submerged, silenced, excised, or disavowed while stressing the political and intellectual urgency of a "something-to-be-done" in the present.<sup>2</sup> Their inquiries makes lucid how state power and its institutional arms (ranging from disciplinary fields like anthropology and sociology to pharmaceutical corporations to the American military-industrial complex) deploy "colonizing tricks" that render opaque the interdisciplinarity of power and its ability to reproduce, legitimize, and secure its domination by any means necessary. If Gilles Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* can be a revolutionary vector of Third Cinema against French colonialism as well as a co-opted pedagogical tool of the Pentagon for American "Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict," the lesson of *state-fullness* is that one must always be wary of potential pitfalls and ready to wage the battle of critique, creation, and most importantly, action.<sup>3</sup> More than just content-driven, these scholars also pay attention to the politics of discursive aesthetics, the form and style of their arrangement of words and ideas, that frequently stretches what

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<sup>2</sup> Avery Gordon. "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity." *borderlands* 10:2 (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Michael T. Kaufman. "The World: Film Studies; What Does the Pentagon See in 'Battle of Algiers'?" *New York Times*, 7 September 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/weekinreview/the-world-film-studies-what-does-the-pentagon-see-in-battle-of-algiers.html>



constitutes “acceptable” and “legible” forms of writing in the academy. If co-optation means to be repossessed by the state, what is a form and style that is immune to such hazards and seductions? To follow the citation trail of a quotation, Roland Barthes, whose passage is quoted by James Clifford and George Marcus and requoted through them by Avery Gordon, states, “To do something interdisciplinary it’s not enough to choose a ‘subject’ (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one.”<sup>4</sup>

Rigorously open-ended and relentlessly questioning, I am motivated by the way my coterie of filmmakers keenly rejects the positivist logic and scientific empiricism that undergirds a distant, disinterested, and disaffected objectivity. It is thus not enough to gain a self-interested and state-legitimizing “cultural competency” to “[capture a predisposed] reality on the run” and reinscribe the self back into a structural logic that determines which meanings will have use, value, truth, and authenticity.<sup>5</sup> My chapters point to the wild tangle of complicities, contradictions, and contestations that the filmmakers confront through and with their subjects. Not just *kinetic*, they enact an aesthetics of kinship, or *kinaesthetics*, that roams and even rambles across the boundaried influences of media, culture, community, and nation in order to yield surprising results. Their singular voice as the artist co-mingles and co-creates with the voices of their others, as a polyphony and a palimpsest, a coalition of selves that make up the Self, the many in the one.

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha. Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 94.

## II.

*On A Korean/American Epistemology*

First, one might wonder, “Why is an intellectual project that is about a *Korean/American epistemology* primarily composed of chapters that are non-specific to *Korean American studies*?” My point of departure is, inevitably and transparently, personal. I grew up as a Korean American in the San Francisco East Bay Area of the Reagan-dominated 1980s and Clinton-dominated 1990s. My neighborhood’s block was inhabited by Filipino and Chinese Americans, working and middle class, where most parents were recent immigrants and their children, classified as “second generation.” The public schools I attended were populated by a Black, Latino, and Asian student of color majority, where whites were the decisive minority. Leaving the Bay behind, my combined undergraduate and graduate experiences took me to the politically conservative campus, UCSD, located in a city dominated by military and defense, San Diego, and situated just 20 minutes away from the heavily militarized U.S.-Mexico border in the post-9/11 era of American history. I have found myself in academic, social, community, and political spaces where learning, relating, and organizing around issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are not taken for granted and have to happen through tremendous effort and in coalition. Thus, by “[naming] a condition within which an individual takes his or her self as object of epistemology,” I am

acknowledging that I am “inscribed by the *uneven* terrain constituted by a broad range of power relations” (emphasis mine).<sup>6</sup>

To describe identity as a process is to affirm on a basic level the deconstructive politics of “difference [that] precedes and constitutes identity,” rather than a reactive and reactionary politics of identity.<sup>7</sup> I want to take seriously Kandice Chuh’s complicated call for Asian American Studies to be reconceived as a “subjectless discourse,” and I wonder if my project can take her theoretical conception to its utmost edge and extremities. Could I possibly define *Korean American* as an “interior exteriority” or in the space-time of quantum physics, as an event? Could *subjectlessness* – beyond just a floating, empty signifier in the poststructuralist sense – also be an immaterial signification whose aggregate expression through the *multitude within* are what re-sounds as the *singularity without*? I turn to Jean-Luc Nancy who, on the act of listening, questions, “What secret is at stake when one truly *listens*, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?... What does *to be* listening, *to be* all ears, as one would say ‘to be in the world,’ mean?”<sup>8</sup> The import and importance of Nancy’s circuitous thinking is that one’s sensory acquisitions through listening is about the awareness of one’s self as well as the awareness of an *other* self through which one is able to change and transcend the relationship of *oneness* to one’s self. The self is a diffusion, a chamber of echoes: the voice that comes through to one’s ears is

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<sup>6</sup> See Kandice Chuh’s *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 115.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 147.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy. *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 5.

absorbed, processed, refracted, and is regenerated through one's own at a time that is undetermined, even if the original source is now long-gone and vanished. The being of self is always already the being-with other.

Furthermore, the "we" that is contained in "me" will be different from the "we" that is in "you." Thus, *Korean American* is formed not only on the basis of *difference*; it is expanding an ethics of difference to mean a differential and differentiated complicity, vulnerability, and most importantly, *solidarity* in the face of different systems of domination.

My incorporation of the forward slash between *Korean* and *American* is meant to evoke (1) the textual break inside poetic verses, (2) the filmic cut between two shots, and (3) the militarized division of the Korean peninsula that shadows all exchanges between it and the United States. It is a playful, pedagogical, and political gesture that amplifies the pressure and density contained within the constructedness of *Korean American* itself as a category while endeavoring to point out the traumatic marks of racism, capitalism, and war that even make it possible. Elsewhere, this gesture may recall a similar move that David Palumbo-Liu makes with the solidus in his formulation of "Asian/ American" in order to enunciate "an element of undecidability" and "a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement" of Asians in America and Americans in Asia.<sup>9</sup> Palumbo-Liu's focus is on the *historical crossings* that transpire within and between continents across the Pacific Ocean. Here, the *forward slash (/)* is meant as a symbol for the ceasefire and "unfinished

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<sup>9</sup> David Palumbo-Liu. *Asian/ American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

business” of 1953 that forms a *hauntology*, a *ghostly being* in the space between Korean and American. The forward slash aesthetically breaks apart Korean and American but also hopes for a radical futurity in which not only the Korean peninsula but the entirety of the globe is truly demilitarized and decolonized. The larger implications of the forward slash for a *Korean/American* epistemology is that I consider the social, historical, and political construction of *Korean/American* as not as a wall but a contingency.

## Why Ferguson Matters to Asian Americans

August 20, 2014 10:02 am

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by Soya Jung

Left of the color line.  
Empire resister.  
Unapologetic problem  
minority.

81 Comments

### TOPICS

Asian American model  
minority myth  
Ferguson  
Mike Brown



Korean protester captured by a South Korean soldier during the democratic uprising in Kwangju. May 1980.

Figure 1.2: “Why Ferguson Matters to Asian Americans”

One recent example that illustrates an “interior/exterior” understanding of *Korean/American* comes from Soya Jung, a Senior Partner for Changelab.<sup>10</sup> In her widely circulated Race Files article, “Why Ferguson

<sup>10</sup> ChangeLab “is a grassroots political lab that explores how U.S. demographic change is affecting racial justice politics, with a strategic focus on Asian American identity. Through research and cross-sector convening, we seek to revitalize a contemporary Asian American politics grounded in multiracial solidarity. We also provide communications platforms to

Matters to Asian Americans," Jung attempts to unpack the complexity of her feelings as a Korean American in the aftermath of the murder of Michael Brown by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, in August 2014:

First, I have said before that I come from war. My rage is not the same rage that [black feminist writer Brittney] Cooper describes. But I can relate to her when she says:

Rage must be expressed. If not it will tear you up from the inside out or make you tear other people up. Usually the targets are those in closest proximity. The disproportionate amount of heart disease, cancers, hypertension, obesity, violence and other maladies that plague black people is as much a product of internalized, unrecognized, unaddressed rage as it is anything else.

There is a word in Korean culture, *han*. It is hard to define, yet it deeply shapes Korean consciousness. To quote Elaine H. Kim, it loosely means "the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression... When people die of *han*, it is called dying of *hwabyong*, a disease of frustration and rage."

Coming from a people who were controlled, occupied, and threatened with erasure by outside forces over centuries, and brutalized as silage in a war between the United States and the Soviet Union, *han* was not something that I consciously embraced. It is in my blood. *Han* is Korean rage. It was expressed in protests against Japanese colonial rule in 1919, in the struggle for self-determination as the Korean war broke out in 1950, during student protests against the oppressive U.S.-backed South Korean government in 1960, and again during the democratic uprising in Kwangju in 1980.

I would never equate my inheritance of *han* to the real and imminent threat of violence that Ferguson's black community and so many others face now. But I will say that I hold my own rage close to me, as part of my identity. I understand the need to defend, protect, and express it."

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highlight the damage that racial ideas about Asian Americans have done to the broader racial justice movement – by reinforcing anti-black racism, justifying U.S. Empire, and marginalizing Asian American struggles." <http://www.changelabinfo.com/>  
 "Soya Jung's article "Why Ferguson Matters to Asian Americans," has provided an important and enduring thought piece and point of departure for Asian Americans to be critical of their complicity with anti-Black racism and the police state. This is especially true in light of Asian

Provocatively, what precedes her writing is a grainy black and white facsimile of a photograph that shows a “Korean protester captured by a South Korean soldier during the democratic uprising in Kwangju, May 1980” right before he is presumably bludgeoned by a club. The photograph as a document, while *specific* to a political and social rupture in South Korean history, haunts forward to the domestic warfare of Ferguson in the present while haunting backwards to the *We Charge Genocide* petition of 1951 where the Civil Rights Congress (CRC) connected the murder of Black Americans with the murder of Koreans overseas, bristling that “[we] cannot forget Hitler’s demonstration that genocide at home can become wider massacre abroad, that domestic genocide develops into the larger genocide that is predatory war.”<sup>12</sup> These outwardly unconnected traces of history, now juxtaposed, form a montage that allows us to see the continuities of the United States not *at war* but *as war* – domestic and international, low intensity and high – and the raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies and lives rendered most bare to these premeditated logics, practices, and proximities of and to death that are necessary to sustain the ascendant life of American nation and empire.<sup>13</sup>

Parsing out the radical dimensions of Jung’s rage – what she labels as *han* that is brought from the Korean peninsula into the Korean diaspora – I am first drawn to the decolonizing poetics of Gloria Anzaldúa whose body of

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Americans who organized on behalf of Chinese American police officer, Peter Liang, who was responsible for the fatal shooting of Akai Gurley but faced no jail time.

<sup>12</sup> William L. Patterson. *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People* (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1951).

<sup>13</sup> Here I am paraphrasing Korean American legal scholar, Sora Han, who states, “The United States is not at war. The United States is war” as quoted in Andrea Smith’s “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing.”

work addresses the violence of settler colonialism and erasure of indigeneity, and whose evocative use of the term, *autohistorías*, broaches upon how speaking for the self is also speaking for the others that exist within the self. In so doing, she attempts to create modes of writing and worlding that break open the stranglehold of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and racial capitalism and posit new subjects of history.<sup>14</sup> As well, speaking for the self through the other involves an understanding of the self and its positionality. In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks thinks through a politics of location where one can begin to move, think, and inhabit spaces where the hierarchy between oppressor and oppressed is vanquished and “diverse pleasures can be experienced, enjoyed even, because one transgresses, moves, ‘out of one’s place.’”<sup>15</sup> In this way, one’s own positioning of the self also involves a consciousness of one’s relationality to others, where the imagination of the *individual* does not have to succumb to the myopic vision of an *individualist* especially as determined by the interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and sex domination that are structured in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The individual imagination involves a transgressive re-visioning of the formation of the self that is indifferent and indifference to the propulsive drive towards possessive (neo)liberal individualism that marks the terrain of American coloniality and exceptionalism. What would it mean to assert a formation of the *self* that is in

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<sup>14</sup> Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* helps to theorize the violence of the U.S.-Mexico and offer a radical lens for examining other modern borders that exist at the Korean peninsula and the Gaza Strip in Palestine.

<sup>15</sup> bell hooks. “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Racial Openness.” *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990), 203.



radical redistribution amongst the collectivities that make the co-creative acts of the self possible?

*On Documentary/Ethnography/Anthropology*

Documentary provides a *site* and *sight* that is ripe for critique. If my project can be, positively or negatively, assigned as being “first person,” “reflexive,” or “subjective,” I turn to the other side that governs these terms to critique documentary genre and genealogy. The documentary genre, as it relates to the question of the visual aesthetic is historically tied and tethered to the rise of anthropology as a discipline and the development of ethnography as its principal method in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the ways in which the visual mechanism was seen as one totalizing method to capture and demarcate the movement of *different* bodies held within its frames. Much like how eugenicism depended upon the pseudo-science of measuring cranial size and capacity to determine a racial hierarchy of man, the visual documentation of non-white bodies performing both spectacular and quotidian acts became yet another mechanism for mapping otherness against which a European/American whiteness could further consolidate its boundaries. To visualize, then, was also to temporalize and to racialize through an evacuation of the racial body’s interiority. That is to say, these early visual documents became one way through which the West could further study and cement *race* as a distinguishing feature for the spectrum of subjects and objects in writing

history as well as concomitantly, the provenance of civilization and savagery in be(com)ing human.

In *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Fatimah Tobing Rony details at length to the early fixity of and on corporeality in visual ethnography. See, for example, early chronophotography by Charles Comte and Felix-Louis Regnault that recorded in series of frames the walking, running, and jumping of “Negro” and “native” *figures*, as *figments* and *figurations* that served a dual function: that (1) these racialized bodies expressed a primitiveness and therefore a closeness to the natural world that ironically was being destroyed through colonial extraction that perversely (2) became its own pathological *and* pedagogical device for how the modern man of the colonial metropole was losing his own physical virility and superiority. The other point about these early visual experiments was that they were not only posed as legitimate forms of research data but also found circulation in popular exhibitions at World’s Fairs, movie houses, zoos, and museums for the mass consumption of the public. As ethnographic spectacles, they were meant to instruct and educate as well as entertain and titillate. This archive of images, then, in their meticulous, mathematical, “scientific” attention to the form of the negative frame but as well, the figures that are cast out into the negative space of the West’s formation, also inform the rise of early ethnographic films like Robert Flaherty’s account of an Inuit family in Canada’s Hudson Bay in *Nanook of the North* (1922) and can be thought of as the genealogical origin for considering the matrix of questions concerning “objectivity” that continue to shadow the documentary genre to the

contemporary age. To document, one might say, is also to stake a claim in the will to defining knowledge, truth, and reason. As such, Rony argues that “[a]nthropology legitimized imperialism through its ‘scientific’ findings that indigenous non-European peoples were inferior and at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder of history.”<sup>16</sup> Following the work of Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, she concludes that anthropology creates a time machine in the present, where racial subjects are objectified and fetishized through their otherness so that the physicality of their very *live*-liness that is being represented within the visual frame is already mummified and considered to be dead. Imperialism, then, is dependent on what I would deem to be these carceral regimes of visibility for establishing a self and other and for justifying its power and expansion.

### *On Visual Nonalignment*

Third, my relation to the cinematic frame is one of visual *nonalignment* that recalls the anti-colonial language first developed through the banner of the *Third World*. As Jodi Kim describes, nonalignment meant a “third way between the ‘monopoly capitalism of the West’ and the ‘political and cultural totalitarianism of the East,’ a path that would reject Cold War binaries.”<sup>17</sup> Kim also extends *nonalignment* in the context of Asian American Studies to mean the production of “alternative or ‘non-aligned’ knowledges that

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<sup>16</sup> Fatimah Tobing-Rony. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>17</sup> Jodi Kim. *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 14.

“discombobulate’ the Manichean logics of official nationalist Cold War histories, epistemologies, and ontologies.”<sup>18</sup> What does it mean for me to read the cinematic frame in ways that *discombobulate* hegemonic power? Philosophically, I turn to *Camera Lucida* where Roland Barthes writes that in his “desire to write about Photography” he possesses “a desperate resistance to any reductive system” and wonders, in halting terms, if, perhaps, every object must necessarily have its own science.<sup>19</sup> Barthes thus (in)conclusively decides that rather than adhering to a predetermined canon of photographs (those already deemed to be monumental, memorial, and worth remembering), he will go against the grain of disciplinarity and pick those that strike his eye most and begin his investigation there. Further, he states that “the Photographer’s organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things).”<sup>20</sup> In these deceptively simple acts of thinking, questioning, and selecting is generated an aperture that enables me to loop into and follow the trail left by Barthes and think of not just a different relationship to the cinematic / photographic frame but too, a different relationship to what constitutes a methodological rigor in their very study as well as the potential for the visual aesthetic to serve as a menacing medium. Indeed, the operative terms of methodology, as I briefly noted in my previous section on anthropology and ethnographic cinema’s origins, are often

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 15.

dependent on a decisively oppressive logic of Western empiricism for those who have historically been dispossessed, marginalized, erased, and left for dead in modernity's project. I am suggesting, then, that the new rigor calls for inventive and more ethically inspired methodologies that will attend to the specificities of each subject/object's field and phrasing while also being attentive to their historical conditions of possibility.

I am careful to note that modernity as a conceptual tool, a political system, and a lived experience is not monolithic and is always subject to multiple geographies, temporalities, and expressions. For the purposes of this question and my project, I am primarily interested in the relations of rule between a Western hegemonic and hegemonically Western modernity and its many discontents and the ways in which Third and Third World cinema can not only mediate and negotiate, but also question and disrupt that colonial relation of power. By this latter point, I mean that these "other" visual representations can be a potent medium that harnesses the potentiality to incite, if not agitate the visual spectator toward a more meaningful and ethical conscience, politic, and relationality in and to the social world.

*Visual nonalignment* also finds inspiration in Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* where she tracks an oppositional consciousness and history across the terrain of both canonical *and* decolonial philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to "consolidate and extend what we might call manifestos for liberation in order to better identify and specify a mode of liberation that is effective within First World neocolonizing global conditions

during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>21</sup> Sandoval is burrowing into the undercommons of the dominant structures of thought that outline the very limits of Western *rational* expansion by way of its delimiting the ends of the psyche, economy, and even meaning itself. And yet, what for the colonial Western citizen-subject constitutes the ends, Sandoval finds the routes toward an “alternative and dissident globalization,” toward a future world that is not yet imaginable yet still waits, furtively, fervently, in possibility.<sup>22</sup> Visual nonalignment is thus a composite discourse that travels through a wide range of Marxist, structuralist, postmodern, and postcolonial theories as they relate to the re/production of the subject as it is bounded to *yet also exceed* the technologies of subjection and subjectification within and without the state.

I imagine my theoretical provocation is necessarily confined to the realm of aesthetic representation with respect to the cinematic frame but as it specifically deals with the question of failure. In other words, I look for interpellation’s ideological missiles and missives that “miss the mark,” that are in excess of the modes of production, and slip past or beyond the normative structure’s desire to “do the work” that will repeat the reconsolidations of hegemonic power structures such as capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. In “Deconstructing Historiography,” Gayatri Spivak writes about failure in the context of dominant historiography. What is being produced in these narratives is not the subaltern but rather the subject-effects of the subaltern as manifest through the crisis it produces for the

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<sup>21</sup> Chela Sandoval. Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 2.

people in authority. Thus, the problem of writing and reading history, then, is that one that must not assume a stand-in “collective” consciousness for the subaltern but rather, take into consideration the position of power inhabited by and in the act of writing and reading the subaltern. We do not and will not see the truth of the subaltern (for that is an impossibility) but instead must trace the “immense discontinuous network... of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language...” of the subaltern’s ultimate illegibility, the failure to be rendered as a subject and the cognitive failure of those who are subject to recognize the subaltern as such.<sup>23</sup> Hence, rather than a recuperation or an effort to recreate the scene of absence or loss, Spivak instead opts for a method of “affirmative deconstruction,” that is, a strategically positivist essentialism where “The historian must persist in *his* efforts in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic” (emphasis in original). My understanding and reading of the visual frame is tempered by an acknowledgement of the limit and its contours but with the hope that limit can also lead to more decolonial “lines of force and affinity.”

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<sup>23</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. “Deconstructing Historiography.” *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13.

## III.

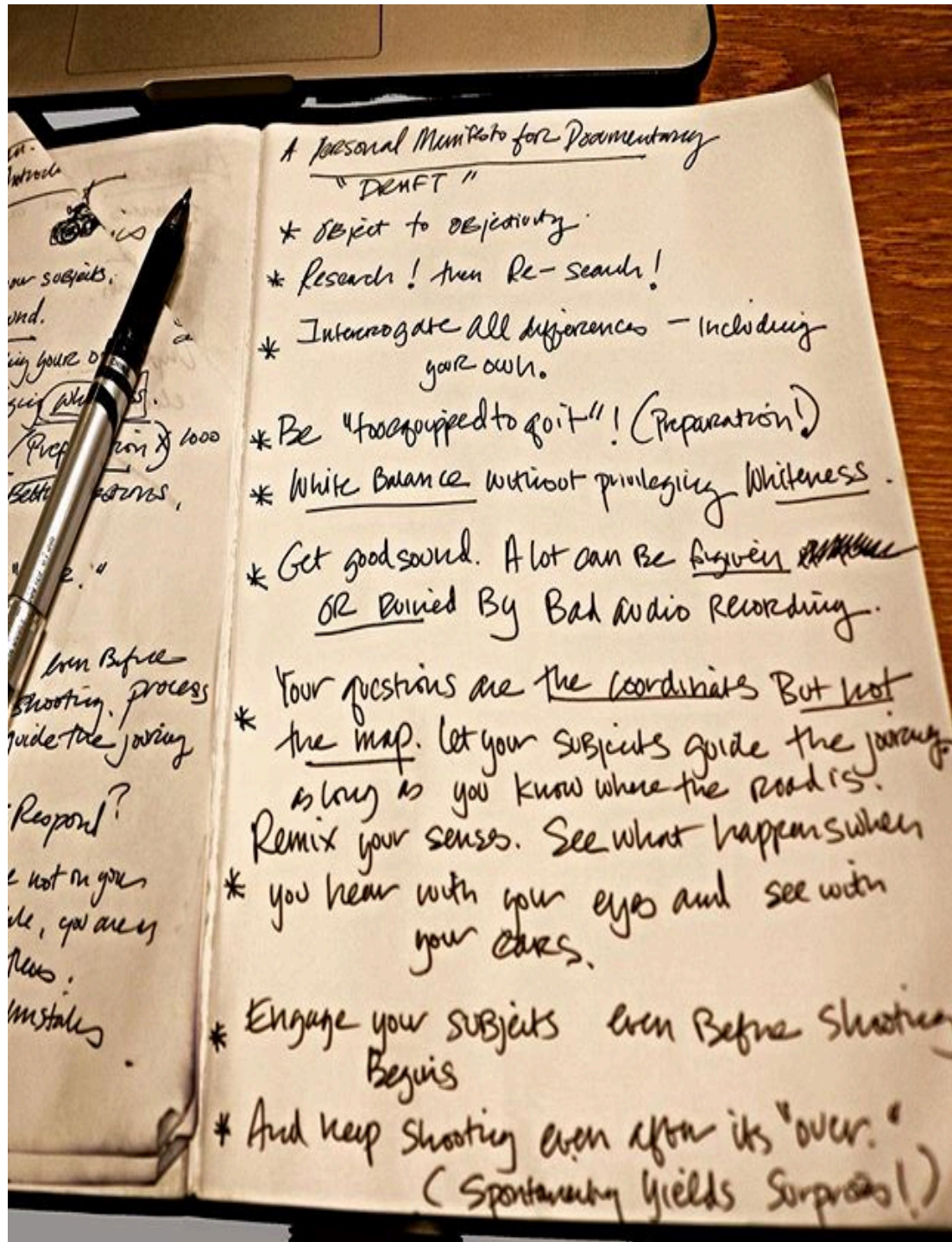


Figure 1.3: "A Personal Manifesto for Documentary Filmmaking"



## IV.

Our destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile.

-Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*

In closing, if *Motions of Search* is at its heart, an eruption of the self, I necessarily end with another beginning – the generative aesthetic gestures and “possibilities of productive anguish” that appear in the work of the late Korean American artist and in so many ways, my artistic foremother, Theresa Hak H Kyung Cha.<sup>24</sup> As such, my title communes with the haunted passage, “the eloquent stutter,” that composes this section’s epigram and whose invocation of the shattered and scattered pieces of the Korean diaspora from which I emerge is taken from what is considered to be Cha’s defining (and only full-length) text, a series of *recollected* dispatches in the form of an “anti-documentary autobiography” *récit, Dictee*.<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> In a section she calls, “Melpomene/Tragedy,” she evokes a blank film screen that interpellates the Greek muse by name and vocation through the textual séance of ink black letters, and in physical and psychic merger, Cha as Melpomene (and Melpomene as Cha) – the personal pronoun “I” now bouncing off the white mirror of the page and refracted through a plural “they” – emits a mournful sound, a dirge that migrates like a wraith to the other side. What is found there, then, is a reproduction of a map of Korea placed without citation or

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<sup>24</sup> Ed Park. “This is the writing you have been waiting for.” *Exilee/Temps Morts: Selected Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2009), 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 9.

<sup>26</sup> This rather unwieldy term is coined by Asian American literary scholar, Anne Anlin Cheng, in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001) and speaks to the difficulty of classifying a text such as *Dictee*. I deploy it here precisely because of its attempt and failure to describe Cha’s aesthetic practices.

explanation, a document from an archive that is conspicuously ghosted. We can determine, even in its deliberate decontextualization, that the geographic features are conspicuously *after* the unilateral bifurcation of the peninsula at the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel by three American officials “into a Soviet occupation zone in the North and an American one in the South,” a latitude whose territorial and epistemological violence is now perceived to be an *a priori* phenomenon and not, to follow the spiritual fury and furious spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa, another gaping, “open wound” of American empire.<sup>27</sup>

For Koreans who reside on either side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) – a line whose manufacture is now “hardened... into an impassable, intensely fortified, militarized border” – the realization of reunification is authoritatively consigned to the domains of postponement and fantasy: the language of “liberation” from 36 years of brutal Japanese colonial occupation and rule still commemorated every August translating, discomfitingly, into the “freedom” of a protracted American military occupation and war.<sup>28</sup> Cha’s insertion of this fractured, seemingly self-evident map – one that wordlessly distends Korea’s decisive place in the ideological and epistemological production of post-1945 Cold War geopolitics, American global ascendancy, and Area Studies disciplinarity – is quite literally on the back of Tragedy and pressed against another page that documents in sparse prose the film-going

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<sup>27</sup> I am drawing upon Jodi Kim’s incisive analysis in *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2010) in which she disrupts the Manichean binary of U.S. and Soviet geopolitics with the triangulation of the Asia/Pacific.

<sup>28</sup> Christine Hong. “The Hollywood ‘Demonization Script’: ‘The Interview’ and U.S. Regime-Change Policy Toward North Korea,” *The Asia Pacific Journal* 12:52 (2014).  
<http://apjif.org/2014/12/52/Christine-Hong/4244.html>

experience of an unnamed female spectator.<sup>29</sup> While the Muse of Tragedy suffers the historical trauma of Korea's severing and the amnesia of that very knowledge by the force of Western universalism, the Angel of History observes from the periphery the enforced impassivity of the audience embodied through the feminine by a tragic cinema, one whose identifications and even the images themselves are unknown or lost to historical oblivion through the collusions of colonial and patriarchal domination.<sup>30</sup> *"Visibility is a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness."*<sup>31</sup> Cha exposes the ensnarement of sanctioned "truth" and deception of official documentation by and through the frame of what is made visible. Through these dis-orienting aestheticized maneuvers, the cartographic and cinematic *projections* of imperial/Orientalist world-making that can easily abstract Korea into the fabricated discourse of a "limited" or "proxy" war are superimposed and coalesce, visualizing how "[the] illusion that the act of viewing is to make alteration of the visible. The expulsion is immediate. Not one second is lost to the replication of the totality."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce Cumings traces the rise of Area Studies disciplines as a state-sponsored imperative to accumulate knowledge about the world in the wake of World War II's end in order to secure American control over the rise of Communism. "Boundary Displacement: Area Studies and International Studies during and after the Cold War." Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars 29:1 (1997). <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/cumings2.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Cha's use of fragmentary language in Dictee takes language down to its most bare structures: here to evoke the cinema. I am evoking an object piece by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha where she summons the audience as her distant relative, a kinship that is established through the shared experience of viewing.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Cha, Dictee, 79.

In the face of such domination, what is the strategy for exit or escape, let alone resistance? The simulation of cinematic jump cuts through the somatic act of a reader turning from one page to the next is Cha's attempt to show the oscillation between regimes of subjectivity and anonymity, between what is recognizable and what is (sometimes irretrievably) missing, in drawing attention to the tensions inherent to the unequal relation of power, representation, and knowledge production. Now "cutting" to a direct address of her mother in the form of a letter, she narrativizes the materiality of the process involved in constructing narrative as well as her own ill-fated journey to South Korea after an 18-year absence to shoot what would be an abandoned film project, *White Dust from Mongolia*, in 1980. She writes her mother that she sees beyond the vision that is given to her through a chain of caesuras that vent "the same war... Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate.": an encounter with yet another juncture in South Korean history that crystallizes the long-term instabilities of suspended decolonization and suppressed democratization, with the assassination of dictator Park Chung Hee on October 26, 1979, the coup d'état by army general Chun Doo Hwan on December 12 1979, and the Gwangju Massacre in the Jeolla Province yet to come in May 1980 in which the murder of protesters and citizens alike by government paratroopers numbered anywhere between 200 to 2,000.<sup>33</sup>

It is worth noting that between 1948 and 1980, South Korean civil society weathered the cataclysmic birth of Five Republics in addition to the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 81.

recovering from the incommensurable scale of death and devastation from the Korean War. With the exception of the Second Republic's brief introduction of a parliamentary system in 1960-1961, the rest were carried out as military dictatorships that inculcated a staunchly anti-Communist national culture of fear, terror, and torture buttressed by a Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) whose murderous tactics and techniques of repression emulated and ultimately transcended their American masters.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the postdate given by Cha for this letter, April 19 (or *Sa-il-gu*, 4-1-9, in keeping with the use of integers to mark flashes of rupture and revolution in Korean history), conducts the fragile trace, the recurring fragrance and phrasing of Spring 1960 when "students and other segments of Korean society forced Syngman Rhee to resign his presidency... [and] established a model for future antigovernment protests, providing an all-too-rare moment of success for people's movements in South Korea."<sup>35</sup> April 19's memory of mass uprising persists even against the political chaos that silently underlines her words, the events that at any instant can overcome the legibility of her words.

Cha then tries in vain to revisit the agonized scene of division and revive "[the] *population standing before North standing before South for every bird*

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<sup>34</sup> As Bruce Cumings notes, "A formerly classified State Department study states that by the mid-1950s 'counter-subversion had become a major U.S. government concern throughout the Free World': thus under a plan known as the '1290-d program,' American authorities assisted ROK security agencies with 'equipment and a modest training program' and tried to bring about better coordination among Korea's myriad intelligence groups. This, the study said, was the 'sorcerer's apprentice' that led to the vast Korean Central Intelligence Agency, an organization 'far transcending the advisers' intentions.'" Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 368.

<sup>35</sup> Syngman Rhee was the nominal President of South Korea's First Republic after the ceasefire of the Korean War. However, his administration was riddled by government corruption and state repression of political dissidents. Paul Y. Chang, (Protest Dialectics: State Repression and South Korea's Democracy Movement, 1970-1979. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2015).

*that migrates North for Spring and South for Winter becomes a metaphor for the longing of return. Destination. Homeland.*"<sup>\*</sup> Desire is staged through metaphor, metaphor through words – and the words themselves simply accumulate from page to page until they, too, disassemble and break apart any illusion of unity or resolution. As much as she attempts to create a linguistic apparatus (with English, French, Korean, Chinese, and Latin) that can frame and translate, *last out* and *outlast* the depth of her desires to recover her home, her mother, and even herself, there is only greater distance that is created through textual displacement in spite of the discursive attempt to make close and to close the space within and without. The alienation of her fraught "homecoming" in 1980 is only an imperfect echo, a thwarting parallel vis-à-vis her mother's experience as a Japanese colonial subject in the 1930s. Cha finally muses that their shared "destination is fixed on the perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile." Such is the lack of fixity, the refusal of stasis, for those whose physical and psychic condition is ascribed as immigrant, foreigner, outsider, resident alien, or exile. Her "origin," as it were, is a cinema of eternal return, where space, time, and movement are not linear but cyclical. It is a statement in negation, a progress in retrograde, that calls into question the binary opposition that overdetermines so many immigration stories – of old world "left back" for new, of the mother/land "left behind" and the terminus that marks not a finish but yet another boundary-line, elsewhere and here. It also calls to attention that one can only be emancipated

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\* Cha, *Dictée*, 80.

from this troubled condition through a confrontation with the repressive state apparatus and “[arresting] the machine that purports to employ democracy but rather causes the successive refraction of *her* none other than her own.”<sup>37</sup>

Out of this existential crisis of the self that is split wide open, an *internal* split that is seasoned by the *external* split of the Korean peninsula, Cha does not resign herself to the confinement of *her self* nor does she stay mired in the indulgence of an individualizing loss. With the repetition of oppressions from past to present, her motion of search takes the self that has been torn apart and tethers it tirelessly to the future, constantly reinventing it through a radical suturing with the possibility of its many, multiple others who languish but *live on*. While my own life does not begin till the year after Cha’s untimely death in 1982, the conditions of possibility for our personal histories are found “in the same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt” – and forged through the lives, movements, dislocations, and struggles that happen in these historical architectures of Japanese colonialism, American imperialism, and South Korean authoritarianism in the geopolitical turbulence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>38</sup>

It is here that she began and ended.

And it is where she leaves off, that I must and will begin, too.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 81.

## Chapter 1:

### **"And if my life is like the dust/ That hides the glow of a rose...": On Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and the Aesthetics of *Sur*Realism**

This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear. And when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late.

-Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1973)

#### *Prelude*

In this chapter, my motions of search take me to Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977) and a constellation of mixed media texts (a music video, a cache of personal letters, and a series of records) that surround it. Displacing the primacy of debates that obsess over the parameters of what constitutes the genre fixation of documentary, I examine how Burnett connects the creative function of *narrative* with the ideological format of *documentary* in order to assemble an audiovisual mixtape of everyday life of the Black community in Watts, Los Angeles during the 1970s – one whose frequencies play, with love, persistence, and a distinct lack of sentiment, against the static of racial capitalism and white supremacy that saturates *official* documentations of Watts and Blackness, whether by the oppressive stare of the state, the police, or the mass media. Offering a localized Black cinematic grammar, *Killer of Sheep* calls forth an aesthetics of *surreality*, that is to say, a political and aesthetic orientation that is infused and layered by the tripled meaning of *sur* – the history of migration from the American South, the Third Cinema aesthetics of



the Global South, and everyday life in South Central Los Angeles. Burnett thus offers a view of a place and its people that struggles to discern the subterranean above ground and the *surrealism* in the everyday so that other possibilities for radically reorganizing social institutions and relations can be witnessed.

## I.

Restored from the original 16mm to a 35mm blow-up print by the UCLA Film and Television Archive, *Killer of Sheep* (1977) witnessed a 2007 re-release by Milestone Pictures (spurred along by an eleventh hour donation by director Steven Soderbergh). Charles Burnett's independently produced feature film debut, shot on the weekends of 1973 and 1974 as an MFA student film for a budget of less than \$10,000, is now considered to be one of the hallmarks of a movement of Black filmmakers<sup>39</sup> trained at the UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television from the 1960s to the 1980s known as the L.A. Rebellion.<sup>40</sup> In it, Burnett presents an intimate ensemble of a working class

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<sup>39</sup> In this chapter, I consciously capitalize the terms Black and Blackness as a way of illuminating the radical politics and aesthetics that spurred the film practices of the L.A. Rebellion: committed as they were to the production of Black images not circumvented through whiteness and by Black-identified people. I also acknowledge that, situated as I am as a Korean American in the United States, my work here is an admittedly small gesture of discursive and political solidarity to the matter of Black lives and to the way Black lives must matter. As Lori L. Tharps states in "The Case for Black with a Capital B" ([New York Times Op-Ed](#), 18 November 2014), "If we've traded Negro for Black, why was that first letter demoted back to lowercase, when the argument had already been won? Publications like *Essence* and *Ebony* push back, proudly capitalizing the B. But claiming the uppercase as a choice, rather than the rule, feels inadequate. Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It's only correct."

<sup>40</sup> The name "L.A. Rebellion" is a point of contention amongst cultural critics and even the filmmakers themselves. The Rebellion in part refers to the 1965 Watts Rebellion that became one of many such urban uprisings in the 1960s that gave material and physical voice against legal, political, and economic disenfranchisement and violence in poor Black communities across the nation. "The Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers" is another frequently used

Black family playing to and against each other like a chamber music as they live out their daily lives in Watts, California: Stan, a slaughterhouse worker who kills the eponymous sheep and has trouble sleeping; his wife; their children; and a chorus of friends and children that comprise their neighborhood.

Since 2007, *Sheep* has undergone a critical renaissance, garnering a consistent praise that seems as comic as it is much belated. During its limited first runs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Burnett recounts (and with no shortage of humor): “When my film won some recognition in Germany (Berlin International Film Festival Critics Prize in 1981), I read in the American papers about the Berlin Film Festival and there was no mention, not one mention of my film. They mentioned what was on the menu at the gala, but nothing about the film.” Contemplating his comparative recognition in Europe, Burnett offers the analogy: “It was the same story with jazz. It seems that you have go across the ocean to be recognized, and then, perhaps, these guys here might eventually catch up.”<sup>4</sup> In this richly laconic observation, he draws a parallel line between his film’s spectral presence and the history of jazz music – and by extension, Black arts – and their mixed receptions across two

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term for the group and is the title for Ntongela Masilia’s essay in the anthology, *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara, in 1993. In a blogpost from 28 October 2011 (<http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/blogs/archival-spaces/2011/10/28/what-s-name-la-rebellion>), Jan-Christopher Horak, Director of the UCLA Film and Television Archive, supports “L.A. Rebellion” for its descriptive and political power, noting its initial usage by African American scholar, Clyde Taylor, for the first retrospective of these films at the Whitney Museum in New York in January 1986 titled, “L.A. Rebellion: A Turning Point in Black Cinema.” The forthcoming documentary, *Spirits of Rebellion: Black Film at UCLA*, by director and producer, Zeinabu irene Davis, provides the first comprehensive look at their history from the inside and also uses “L.A. Rebellion.”

<sup>4</sup> See Aida A. Hozic’s “The House I Live in: An Interview With Charles Burnett.” *Callaloo* 17:2 (1994): 471-487.

continents. He conjures the trans-Atlantic flights of figures as varied as Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, Sidney Bechet, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Nina Simone, among a whole host of others, as they fled from the deadly anti-Black racisms of the United States in pursuit of the ostensible acceptance of (and fascination with) Blackness in Europe. Burnett's *line* thus serves as a cartographic projection of the shadowy expatriated circuits of production, distribution, and performance taken by Black cultural forms and artists as they are mapped against the structural, symbolic, and psychic disavowal of Black lives and bodies. To gain admittance into the dominant regimes of visibility, then, is never a given and *always* conditional. An unfailing insecurity troubles the sureness of the line itself, a line that simultaneously connects together as well as cleaves apart. This *line* that Burnett makes passing reference to in the interview setting is one that is not readily explored in mainstream film critique, however it can stimulate a more probing discussion of how the artistry of Black filmmakers, musicians, and writers is consistently devalued or neutralized in a white dominated culture industry. Instead, the prevailing discussions revolve around how Burnett's film can be claimed or tokenized (however well-intentioned) as a part of the very cultural genealogy its presence has the potential to refute.

Two primary examples of these "good intentions" are as follows. Michael Tolkin now describes a film that was once an American afterthought to European culinary arts thusly, "If *Killer of Sheep* were an Italian film from

1953, we would have every scene memorized.”<sup>42</sup> Reinforcing this problematic and paradoxical relation to Europe and specifically Italy, the prominent *New York Times* film critic, A.O. Scott, published a hotly debated article where he contemplates the kind of films that are needed to fill the void left by the ideological and political exhaustion of an American society reeling from the aftermaths of 9/11 and the 2008 Economic Recession.<sup>43</sup> As an analogue, Scott looks backward and latches onto the movement of Italian neo-realist auteurs and their oeuvre (among them, Roberto Rossellini’s *Open City* and *Paisan*, Vittorio de Sica’s *Bicycle Thief*, and Luciano Visconti’s *Terra Trema*) that emerged after 1945, a historical period that witnessed the transition from the end of the Second World War into the beginning of a Cold War concomitant to the transfer of imperial power from the heart of Europe (England, France, Germany) to the Pax Americana. Between these geopolitical shifts and the everyday struggle to survive, Italian neo-realist films, Scott describes, “concerned themselves with the plight of the poor” while discovering “mysterious, volatile alloy of documentary and theatrical elements.”<sup>44</sup> Scott, then, considers a series of reasons for why a tradition of American neorealism barely exists. Burnett’s film, he conjectures, could be read as one example of a “neorealist impulse” that *might have been*.

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<sup>42</sup> I have found this quotation reproduced in countless newsprint and internet reviews and retrospectives devoted to *Sheep*, most prominently in Nelson Kim’s important *Senses of Cinema* article on Burnett from 2003 (<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/burnett/>) and the official film website itself.

<sup>43</sup> A.O. Scott. “Neo-Neo Realism.” *New York Times*, 17 March 2009. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

To solidify their claims, critics will reference Burnett's observational shots of children at play in the streets of South Central Los Angeles in apposition to the neo-realist footage of debris in the streets of post-war Italy. While there is certainly a "volatile alloy of documentary and theatrical elements" present in Burnett's frames, my move here is to theoretically refuse (if even didactically) the expedient political and economic logic that drives the appeal of the cultural crossover that can substitute one and the other, the visual and cultural accumulation of a Black *other* that can be abstracted and consumed as a fungible commodity but only in service of consolidating the tortured reflection of the European/American *one*. This equation is a false equivalency predicated on the force of conversion that flattens out the specificities of place and time, geography and geopolitics that exist in both sites.<sup>45</sup> Black cultural critic Armond White delivers a similarly defiant missive against the Italian neo-realist label when he bristles, "[The] political biases that favor Italian Neorealism (and Iranian films and *Army of Shadows*) don't work in favor of African-American filmmakers who dare to claim serious artistry. The view on life in *Killer of Sheep* can neither be fetishized nor sentimentalized... *The sharper your perception, the deeper the film will affect you*" (emphasis mine).<sup>46</sup> White's point here is push against the "political bias" of a

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<sup>45</sup> See Saidiya Hartman's crucial work that discusses at length the reduction of Blackness to flesh that is always already marked for commodification and exchange, violation and violence, in the structure of American racial capitalism, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>46</sup> Armond White has been a staunch champion of *Killer of Sheep* while being highly skeptical of its contemporary adulation. He also wrote its DVD liner notes as well as a brief thought piece entitled, "Poverty A Plenty," NY Press, 4 April 2007 <http://www.nypress.com/poverty-a-plenty/>

culture industry that is based on the subjugation and ultimate *nonequivalence* of “serious” Black artistry (let alone the *daring to lay claims* on the dominion of “serious” art). Thus Black artistry’s location in and function as an auxiliary may be symbolically incorporated into the white universal order as a fetish object while whiteness itself as a particularity goes unabated as the aesthetic and human authority against which everything else is refracted and measured.

In this sense, I would say that *Sheep’s* cinematic record, as it plays into the grooves of a localized Black experience and shows life seeping through the hegemonic bloc(k)s, plays a different tune. While Scott and other critics may be looking for a neo-realist impulse in *Sheep*, *Sheep’s* notes run errant melodies that seem familiar at first but force a listening of the image that goes beyond even the formality of the notes themselves. The notes may wander over into and be even heard as music in the hallowed galleries of European aesthetic *largesse*. But the notes as music, and the music as experience, create a distance not *for Europe* but as a space for itself and its people to be heard, evoking and expressing the harsh gallows of an American society still haunted by slavery and the pathological condition of Blackness it (re)produces.

I now turn to the film itself to trace in a key instance the felicitous choreographies of Burnett’s previous statement about his film and the music, the blurring of sight and sound, narrative and documentary, as embodied in the movement of one boy who *physically* and *formally* crosses through all these spaces, sometimes all at once. After Paul Robeson’s sweet crooning of a lullaby, we fade in to a close range shot of a boy concealing himself behind a

shield being pelted with rocks. Burnett's introduction to a place once called Mud City is a dirt battle in progress with a group of preteen and teenage boys in an abandoned lot. Found objects – wooden boards, glass bottles, and the substance of the dirt itself – form the stuff of their imagined warfare and weaponry. Only the direct sounds of these boys, some birds chirping in the distance, and the noisy impact of their various projectiles fill the air.

Transmission towers and power lines form geometric patterns that seem to slice into the sky. Train tracks run through this rough terrain that seems far removed from the romantic images that overcrowd the postcard representations of a glamorous, eternally sunny Los Angeles. A shot through the window of a moving train captures the boys running and hurling rocks followed by another shot of the train rushing by from the point of view of the boys. One of the freight cars read *Southern Pacific*, which incidentally, is the same railroad company that argued to the United States Supreme Court in 1886 that corporations should have equal protection as well as to natural persons under the Fourteenth Amendment (the same that supposedly granted civil and legal rights to newly emancipated slaves, speaking to the logic of the commodity that overruns the *thing* to include Blackness within its objectification).<sup>7</sup>

A kid gets knocked down; play is temporarily suspended. "Can't you see the man is hurt," one of them asks. We see that tenderness and violence are immanent properties to this domain; violence giving way to tenderness,

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<sup>7</sup> Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific R. Co. U.S. Supreme Court. 10 May 1886. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/118/394/>

tenderness always on the threat of being overtaken by violence. The rehearsal of chivalry bound up with its dark waters of aggression: the underpinnings of the men these boys might (have to) become out of the dust and dirt. A deep focus shot later shows our boy in question with an Afro pick tying his shoelaces in the foreground while the rest play by the train cars on the tracks in the back. He is identified as Junior, and he announces his intention to retrieve his BB gun. This boy will become Burnett's bridge between documentary and narrative elements as the camera now cuts to a tracking shot of him sauntering down the sidewalk as two men happen to hop a fence with a stolen television set. An old man observes the robbery in progress as he waters the lawn then disappears, presumably to call the police, with the hose dropped and left running on the grass. Before he can return, the two men, now fuming, continue to make off with the set while Cecil Gant's 1944 blues recording, "I Wonder," plays rather sardonically over their unleashing of expletives. Seemingly unfazed, the boy watches, as do a group of girls who sit by the fence and seem to have wandered into Burnett's frame before fade out. While the thieves can be heard exclaiming, "You ain't seen nothin'!" their very statement of negation about the nature of their crime also points to the limits and possibilities that the camera offers Burnett to capture episodes of life in Watts. In this sequence, from the dirt lots to the sidewalk, we see the complex interplay of different elements, between what is observed, what is staged, what is improvised, that synthesize Burnett's vision.

This vision is one that is *not* Italy. It is assuredly South Central.



## II.

Our journey takes us now to the present. With the experimental short film/music video, *Belhaven Meridian* (2010), Los Angeles-based filmmaker, Kahlil Joseph,<sup>48</sup> crafts a one-take visual poem that rides, saunters, cycles, and finally flips over on its way through a trio of tracks (“A Mess,” “Find Out,” “Blastit”) produced by the Seattle-based hip hop collective, Shabazz Palaces.<sup>49</sup> Shot on 35mm black and white film, *Belhaven* features a cool retro/active style that pays tribute to the sonic, aesthetic, and political matter of *Killer of Sheep* (1977), which finds its way from the political and temporal landscape of a Black Power movement in decline to the supposed post-racial territory of President Barack Obama inhabited by Joseph. Described by one *New Yorker* critic as being “Burnett’s artistic son”), he establishes an aesthetic kinship to his cinematic predecessor by launching the story from in and around the block. The camera proceeds to roam easily, even enigmatically, through a succession of streets in Watts, Los Angeles – streets that are overdetermined by political and economic abandonment alongside police and media surveillance, streets that Joseph and his camera know all too well.<sup>50</sup>

If Hollywood’s white supremacist factory of images and its racist capitalist misogynist pollution that stretches over a century from D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*

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<sup>48</sup> <http://www.pulsefilms.com/director/kahliljoseph/uk>

<sup>49</sup> Shabazz Palaces is composed of Ishmael “Butterfly” Butler, formerly of the Digable Planets and who now produces under the moniker Palaceer Lazaro, and multi-instrumentalist Tendai “Baba” Maraire, son of Mbira master Dumisani Maraire

<sup>50</sup> Hilton Als. “Kahlil Joseph’s Emotional Eye.” *New Yorker*, 18 September 2002. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/kahlil-josephs-emotional-eye>

(2012) is hard to avoid cinematically and symbolically – if even physically and emblematically in its ubiquitous white signage that looms high over the overdeveloped and overpopulated lands of the City of Angels from the Santa Monica Mountains, *Belhaven's* visual and musical grammar resurrects the L.A. Rebellion's refusals of Hollywood and whiteness that continue to have a deadly and conjoined chokehold on the dominant social, cultural, and political imagination. Serving up instead a contemporary allegory for self-discovery, *Belhaven's* "lesson to the weak/ something a fly n\*\*\*\* speaks" invites the viewer to take on the position of an omniscient spirit that is apart from yet a part of the action, cerebral yet centered, restless to rewrite the predominant scripts that range from the condescendingly paternalistic to the flat-out exploitative on Black communities and Black people: a different narrative that is *indifferent* to the camera obscura of Blackness as an imagined coherence only projected through the pinhole of anti-Blackness. Through the expansion of multiple, shifting, and relational points of view, the self here is turned inside out to a multitude of *selves*, the boundaries of Blackness made permeable to the manifold paths of the sociological and the spiritual, the urban and the universal, and especially, the real and the surreal.

Disentangling the mini-episodes that make up *Belhaven* can further illustrate how Joseph's video art circles around and trips the light fantastic from Charles Burnett and the L.A. Rebellion to the present events, the event that is always the present. The opening bypasses exposition with a medium shot of a man (Palaceer Lazaro) in the driver's seat finishing a cell phone call while a woman sits on the roof of this 1968 Chevy Camaro. While the noise of

the engine and street remains audible, the pair's exchange is muted and distilled into a series of captions. The man's on-screen appellation is *Him*, the woman, *Her*. *Him* states, "It's time." *Her*, nonchalant as she hops off the top and into the passenger seat, wonders, "Where are we going?" With no build-up for his peculiar pronouncement, there is also no response given to her question, at least not for us, as they drive away. We are left to interpret that either (a) he does not or will not answer her or (b) we, as the audience-outsiders, are not to be apprised of his answer.

The frame of the image tells us not enough, which is paradoxically *just* enough to start the journey. Puzzlement, and perhaps a mournful, if not morbid, curiosity for the unknown, is what fuels the search, sequestered in a *present* space-time that is always already on the verge of disappearance that co-exists with a *cosmic* space-time that has yet to be represented (not against the white noise that obfuscates our perception beyond this dimension of consciousness). This *cosmic* space-time can come across as *un-credible*, irresponsive, and entirely erratic when it flashes like neon phantoms against modernity's impulse to conquer all things into the categorical status of *things*, to fix, to label, to order, and to exterminate all value for exchange, ready for facile consumption as empty, homogenous commodities on the market. But the cosmic is not merely *out there* in an abstracted, otherworldly conception of the cosmos; it is also, as Robin D.G. Kelley so evocatively suggests through the recounting of his mother's wisdom, found in the reanimation of those very *things* that are presumed to be object and dead, to "see the poetic and prophetic in the richness of our daily lives... [teaching] us to visualize a more

expansive, fluid, 'cosmos-politan' definition of blackness, to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of culture but its makers."<sup>51</sup> If the frame of the image thus compels the *capture* of Black bodies in motion, seeks the *surrender* of their fugitive meanings, and finally renders their depth into the cold mathematics of two-dimensional surface, this process of visual incorporation that prizes the passivity of exchange-value still contains a matter that evades and escapes digestion. It is the depth of Blackness and humanity, a *Black humanity* in the face of dehumanization and death, that resists and stalks the margins of what is *made* to be seen to our eyes in spite of systemic and structural domination. It will not say but it will insinuate a multitude of pathways that can be created beyond the imposition of a straight line, a linearity, the violence of *progress* between two points.



Figure 2.1: *Belhaven Meridian* (2010)

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<sup>51</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley. Freedom Dreams: The Radical Black Imagination (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 2.



Figure 2.2: *Killer of Sheep* (1977)

But let's continue.

As *Him* and *Her* make their way down one street, the camera tracks away to the left to another while Arabic text pops up ("He Saves Us" left untranslated, with deliberation and care) followed by "Watts, Los Angeles" and "Belhaven Meridian." The camera then follows the back of a woman walking down the center of the street. Dressed in a floral print one-piece and boots, her gait is confident; her air, somewhat detached. A man comes up to her, trying to make his move, but he fails to register altogether. She continues to walk away while the camera pulls to the right in the direction of another woman's highly agitated voice. Without ever stopping, we glimpse a two-person film crew, one holding the camcorder and the other holding the boom mike, as they roll a take of a confrontation between her and a couple of men in the front yard of a house while "Sheep Killer est. 1977" reads over them. The

camera then pulls back to the left, skimming a row of houses before heading back to the street where it suddenly turns upside down to catch a young man in an Acrylick™ shirt walking down the center where the woman once was.<sup>52</sup> A tribal mask appears out of nowhere, superimposed, right side-up, over his head, floating, disembodied, and in danger of veering off-frame before his hand reaches out and pulls what is superimposed to make it a part of his grasp and *his reality*. His walk becomes a run, and finally we lose him to the midst, a crowd of children lost in the play against the brightness of a sun that is either at its apex or its decline.

For those in the know, the quick scene that happens then devaporates in the drive-by shooting (by camera, that is) within the kaleidoscopic commotions of the street is Joseph's direct and clever nod to *Killer of Sheep*. It's a crucial moment accessed from *Sheep* that could just as easily breeze by without notice in *Belhaven*, a dispatch that time travels through the past into the future that is the present while reverbing the film's central dilemma and disquiet of Black masculinity in a Los Angeles that can all at once shape it and put it up for display, stunt its life chances and opportunities, and finally threaten to throw it away or destroy it altogether. The man glimpsed sitting

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<sup>52</sup> Acrylick is a L.A. based clothing company whose manifesto reads that they are "a metaphor for the journey of life and the pursuit of one's soul and individuality in this world. The masses may first perceive the word acrylic as being only related to paint, but when analyzed to a deeper symbolic level, it is much more. Acrylic is used to paint and can be easily seen as an element we use to express our feelings, emotions, and soul on paper, canvas, wood, etc. It is a medium that we use to put what we have in our minds and hearts out to the world visually. Acrylick intends for our clothing to have the same purpose. Acrylick clothing is not meant to make the individual that wears our clothing part of the norm, nor do we try to push conformity. Instead we intend to have individuals use our clothing as a way to find their own original spirit. Being able to express visually what they feel within through our clothing." <http://acrylick.net/pages/about-us>

on the stoop is the main protagonist, Stan, the “Sheep Killer est. 1977” in reference to the psychic and physical alienation of his daily labor killing the eponymous animals in the circumscriptions of a slaughterhouse, that last outpost in the face of inevitable deindustrialization: barefoot, clad in an A-line shirt, and “without a decent pair of pants” to his name. Stan’s own point of view about his identity and his situation is left largely undisturbed by those around him and in this case, is even verbally and physically blocked by the conflict between his wife, unnamed, and his friends, Smoke and Scooter, who are trying to convince him to participate in the gun-for-hire murder of a neighborhood person named Buddy.<sup>53</sup>

Stern, unblinking, sheathed only in a simple house dress that might as well be medieval armor: Stan’s wife, nonetheless, crystallizes the anxieties sociological to psychological that Stan faces as she is positioned with the weight and force of her own slight build against Smoke and Scooter, in front of even Stan himself. In *Belhaven*, the Doppler effect of the camera in motion renders her all-important lines out of earshot. But if we return to the longer duration of the scene in *Sheep*, her face will first appear like an oracle of Delphi

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<sup>53</sup> As Paula Massood describes, “[Smoke and Scout] are coded as street characters, their leather jackets and hats reminiscent of the clothing choices of blaxploitation’s pimps and dealers” (emphasis mine).<sup>53</sup> While Massood argues that the pair represents Burnett’s attendant acknowledgement and critique of Blaxploitation, his actual relation to the genre is far more distant and ambivalent. It bears mentioning, however, that this popular yet short-lived black action genre was contemporaneous to the making of *Sheep* and exploited by the Hollywood industry eager to rebound from the collapse of the studio system by preying upon the post-Civil Rights desire of black audiences for black images – even if those images glorified the ideological carnage of guns, narcotics, and the inner-city “ghetto” that bore little to no resemblance to the lived, everyday, and historical experience. “An Aesthetic Appropriate to Conditions: Killer of Sheep, (Neo)Realism, and the Documentary Impulse.” *Wide Angle* 21:4 (1999), 31.

framed in silhouette through the screen door, entering the yard after she overhears their imbalanced equations of manhood with criminality. She will wonder out loud, “Why you always want to hurt somebody?” then tell them to “use your brains, not your fists.” *Brains over fists*. While Stan will ultimately resist the temptation that surrounds him on this given day, the temptation is still there on all the other days that will go unnoticed (at least unnoticed by us). Perhaps, just perhaps, we can think cosmically: conjecture that the young man who appears for that unexplained instant at the end of *Belhaven* is an alternative Stan, a stand-in for Stan, that merges past, present, and future possibilities of who he could be and can yet still be, and who, in taking into his hands the ostensibly intangible magic of the mask, refuses the foreclosure of fallacious binaries of choice between just “brains” or just “fists” and disappears to create his own galaxy of questions, his own destiny.

### III.

*A Series of Epistolary Detours, Summer 2015*

*August 2015*

Dear Mr. Burnett,

It is August: the very summit of the summer season that seems to stretch about me in all directions, hot and panoptic and unforgiving. I’m in the stillness of a room in an apartment whose size seems to dwindle but whose cost has borne a 23.5% bloat, North Park being synonymous – after all – with the urban blight of binding affluence and indifference whose nomenclatures include the hollowed discourse of *gentrification* in polite company or the



sinister extension of *colonialism* to the undercommons. Through the blinds, I gaze upon the lone wisteria tree that sits outside my second story window. In the two-year interval of my residence, I've grown accustomed to the pliant hang of this tree's branches, the soft continuous murmur they make when the breeze picks them up, and the barely perceptible ways that they will answer the quaint chemistry of sun and moon, so sturdy yet so sensitive to the change in cadence of the seasons and all that surrounds it. From here, the first of this month, there is only a falling down that awaits us on both sides (a falling back towards spring or a falling forward towards autumn, and the nominal winter of San Diego that comes and goes yet holds in the mercy of its breach the capacity for decay and regeneration). I have never felt the softness or the cool of its umbrage in the hours that elapse between noon and twilight, have only seen its lusty crown. This view is the entire of my access, this vision of the thing that founts in excess to the circumscriptions by the gridlines of private property and the logic of personal possession. No matter the terror of my happiness or the bulk of my grief, the tree still exists in and of its own time, seemingly unceasing in its being, as if it were time itself but outside it, too, in an endlessness and eternity.

Today, the wisteria tree is of small solace to me. Pain migrates down the length of my shoulder through the arm to my fingertips like a pitiless and furious bloom, leaving me unable to focus on little else. You see: my father is turning 60 in September, and in Korean culture, the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday (called *hwangab*) represents the completion of a full lifecycle under the lunar calendar, the time it takes for the zodiac animal and element under which one was born

to come back into alignment. Perhaps it was a misguided attempt to earn some extra money to pay for his celebration, or perhaps it was a misbegotten dare to evince the absurdity of my manhood against his constant insinuations that what I do in my life (as a student and a teacher, an artist and a writer) will never measure up to his 42 years of being lost in the passions of a hustle or a trade he knows as America. Were this immigrant predicament the stuff of Greek tragedy, pride would be our shared hubris.

Perhaps, though, it is the recognition of a poverty in my language and experience that deprives my courage to convince him, as Carlos Bulosan once wrote in the year before his death, that poetry or literature or “any work of art [has] a social function – to beautify, to glorify, to dignify man... so that darkness, ignorance, brutality, exploitation of man by another, and deceit will be purged from the face of the art.”<sup>54</sup> Such words I will try to say to him through other means, though the reason and hunger for why they exist, and why *I* exist, is no great mystery: for he will remind me in no uncertain terms that it is because of him and the too many others like him who struggle without entitlement to words to make it in this world. To his 42 years, I will always remind *him* of my mother’s 37, many of them by his side, and to their combined 79 years of work and production, the six weeks I spend clocking in and out of a warehouse have done little to mold my body to its labors. What I’m left with, then, aside from a rehabilitated sense of humility, is an uncanny sense of irony that still colors my face crimson. For their work ethic so gritty

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<sup>54</sup> Carlos Bulosan. “The Writer as Worker,” 143.

and tenacious as to bypass the spirit of the Protestant onto the plane of the posthuman transmutes itself into the brute force with which I attacked my daily tasks – and those tasks, in their very grind, repetition, and mindlessness, have mortified me with a complex of nerves and spasms that scoff in the face of literary metaphors and make the very act of writing itself, literally *painful*.

And yet, write I must, if even with the illegibility of a pencil and paper in distress. I plunge myself into a thick and esoteric volume devoted to dendrology (which I discover is the term for the study of trees and other woody plants) on my desk on loan from the neighborhood branch of the public library. I read that wisteria trees can live a century or more, have roots that are coarse, complex, and even murderous, an aggressive growth that is prone to disruption of nearby houses and gardens (and in absence of a garden down below, I wonder if this outwardly passive wisteria should make overtures to imperil the nearby pear tree when no one is around and take to the righteous battle of destroying fences). In the spring, they'll erupt with violent beauty of violet-blue blossoms that droop like Dionysian grapes before they assume the viridescence of their oddly pinnate leaves. Suddenly, I'm stirred from the listlessness of late afternoon by a pair of hummingbirds, lissome and lightning-quick, and I'm reminded of the anti-colonial poet philosophers Aimé and Suzanne Césaire who recognized the hummingbird's subversive potential, "always... surprised that a body that fragile could withstand, without exploding, the double-time march of a beating heart."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Aimé Césaire. "On the Subject of the Hummingbird," qtd. in Wendy Knepper, Patrick Chamoiseau: A Critical Introduction (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 233.

Numerical fact or surrealism? With 1,260 heartbeats per minute and wings that flap up to 70 times per second, the hummingbird is both violent capriccio and vital insurgency with the weight of just under a coin, an avian creature in defiance of nature unable to be contained by the laws of discourse or gravity, darting about the precipice that signals life and its resistances against death.

That precipice is one that your film moves around but the children confront head-on when they take that leap across the frame of your film and the frame of Watts, one after another, the freeze-frame of that low-angle shot in admiration of the wonder and fearlessness of their youth poised in-between the physicality of too many structures that define and threaten to encase their lives, neighborhoods, and communities into a dead end where the deferment of those dreams suspended will *dry up, fester, then run, stink, crust and sugar over, sag, and even one day, explode.*<sup>56</sup> The buildings are mere bookends that mark the space that opens up *for them*. Is this space the faith for miracles to happen in spite of everything, the *surreality* that always eludes the state's attempts at capture and captivity of not just Black bodies but Black imaginations? Below, are the dirt lots where play co-mingles with the cruel danger of assault, accident, assassination of the spirit, mind, and body. Below, too, are the adults consumed by their own cares and worries to notice what transpires overhead while Faye Adams' song saturated in the spiritual and the secular as distilled in a rhythm and blues that precedes its white theft by rock and roll commands them to "shake a hand, shake a hand, shake a hand if you can." But for the

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\* Here, I steal a few lines from Langston Hughes' iconic poem, "Dream Deferred (Harlem)." 101 Great American Poems. Ed. Andrew Carroll, et. al. (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1998), 75.

children, their hands surpass this terrestrial shake, the gesture that can be perceived as a move toward touching consolation or racial integration, their hands and limbs already outstretched like birds in flight in search of their own horizon, already on the brink of touching their own sky.

*July 2015*

Dear Mr. Burnett,

Perhaps you'll think it strange that I'm writing you this letter, especially when the modern phenomenon we call *time* is afflicted by gratuity and haste, where people, at least those who are of my age or even younger, don't take to writing letters anymore. That is to say, I can't seem to recall the last time my mailbox held a correspondence that wasn't delivered to my name and address without the intent of collection for debt or notice of transgression, where I experienced a happy *anticipation* rather than a blunted *anxiety* in the revelation of those ubiquitous off-white or yellow envelopes. Nor, for that matter, can I seem to recall the last time I wrote a letter by the physical drive and coordination of my own hand, a curious, amalgamated script that resembles both a doctor's hurried scrawl and an antiquated cursive ingrained into my sociologically stubborn son-of-immigrants boyhood by the sternness of a second grade teacher named Mrs. G. Van Epps, she already passed on into the ether of her life and my memory, and whose own younger years were to me but a static government newsreel of depression and war (and now mentioned, I can imagine it was her terse and exacting face that I would first

associate with the authority invested in the whole host of manners and conventions that make up the contours of whiteness in this country).

Your name is one I've only encountered from a distance, illuminated in the space of conversation or paper or film. I am compelled to write just the same because there is something about the *form* and *openness*, fact and action of the letter that helps me find a balance between the humility and audaciousness it takes to begin writing, and to write *in the general sense* is to help one think *in the particular*, to test and try out these cycles of ideas, to see if they will remain durable. To state the fullness of my purpose for writing you is because, even before my *intellectual* investment, I have always had a *personal* attachment to your film, *Killer of Sheep*, which I viewed in the context of a college course on comparative North American cinematic perspectives. Something about the way it portrayed love, survival, heartbreak, and hope always resonated with my own childhood and especially my parents. Now, I'm writing about it in a dissertation project where I'm thinking about documentary films that aren't really documentaries – at least not in the conventional sense of the term. Perhaps this stems from my lifelong interest in things that are out of place and away from what they're *supposed to be*; things that confound the perception of others and even themselves as things. I am especially interested in things that on first glance seem utterly recognizable but are in actuality deeply estranged inside, strangers to themselves in search of *something else*. I don't desire to answer questions as much as I desire to ask them.

What I've learned and am learning all too well is that the first impression is not always true – especially not after growing up in a time and country so exceptional for its many industries of illusion, be they thru textbooks or laws or the many movies I devoured as a child. What is unexceptional is the way they work together to wage wars of varying degrees of intensity and form classes of those with power and those without. More technology has not liberated us from this problem; technology's advance has merely outpaced the human's claim to dignity and more often than not sanctioned its destruction in all the ways that Dr. King already prophesied and feared in "Beyond Vietnam."

I have many more left in little notebooks I keep about the cramped quarters of my desk. There are piles of books, and snatches of loose leaf, and pens and pencils whose very disarray seems to suggest the rough drafts for maps that lead me to wander in circles. I admit that these letters were begun in a state of frustration, even turmoil, written in the small glow of after hours when most folks have already gone to bed. Many of them will suddenly start, and take me to a place that cannot be defined. To say this is *nowhere* in particular makes me wonder if this is *utopia* in general – the *no-place* that is caught in the moment before the burst of materialization. Here, beginning and end are one and the same. My words still try though, to establish themselves and rise above the confines of the page; and then somewhere in the middle, they trail off into the dark.

That's when the pen just gives out. Or I give out.

Same difference, I suppose.

The very first of these letters is written on the day after the Fourth of July. I wondered if you'd find it strange that I am writing to you at all, and especially on a night such as this. The Fourth of July, or the *force* of July, in San Diego is especially military in its character and its ways. Even in the most mundane of its details – the canned chorus of flags and grocery store sales, the backyards and the barbecues, the heat and the fireworks – there is something insipid in the way this country celebrates itself, and in its very insipidness, its flagrant desire to assimilate all elements to its image, is the design of its darkness. America is a violent destiny and manifest nightmare for so many, an incomplete romance that is always on the verge of a cunning punch or putrefaction. Like the sheep in your film whose precariousness in life, in living to be put to the imminence of slaughter, is now hanging in the trembling of expiration, in the space between consumption and rot.

Against the bold typeface of American history's proud confusion of tenses between the *always* and *never was*, against even the innumerable pages of my just as confused entertainment of passages between adolescence and adulthood, the lines I write here appear transient, even eidolic, stricken as they are by the nerves and nervousness of language and the loss the words inevitably, ineluctably feel, a feel for loss that eventually loses the words along the way and migrates freely in and through the back alleys of past, present, and future for which there is no singularity in either name or purpose. It's a loss whose frisson finds one iteration in the slow ascent up the scales of the universe like John Coltrane's sonic genesis from which the roving lines of his quarter-of-an-hour reading of "Lush Life" from a half-century ago find their



co-motions, his saxophone expressing the exodus of a love song from its own conventions of genre and sentiment before he and his trio of musicians stage the familiar refrain of Billy Strayhorn's melody about "the very gay places/ those come what may places" in which they will have their fun even as they must acknowledge their coming to grips with the loneliness and "rot, with the rest of those whose lives are lonely, too."<sup>57</sup> The definition of language seems to be what Coltrane and his music makers do here through sound, without the effort of words, as the romance and its negation all-in-one, that bleak endeavor through which loss and its misery, its bitter laughter takes flower, commiserates, and bids farewell.

The words I strive to write here and everywhere else are not what I would describe as the *remains* of those events anterior to the now but rather the marks for my approaching the circularity of their rim, "the rim of the wound" that the poet-critic Nathaniel Mackey conjures with a theoretical sorcery through the Spanish verses of Federico Garcia Lorca to denote the dark sounds (and songs) that are pronounced from the failure of language to come together with a terminology for one's encounter and struggle with a lifetime of sorrow, a "trouble, deep trouble."<sup>58</sup> I wonder: are these breaks one encounters, the rupturing of one's mind, body, and spirit the "trouble, deep trouble" that houses the bass and beauty of the blues as a radically Black aesthetic? Are they the blues whose capture of the baseness and meanness of

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<sup>57</sup> [http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Johnny\\_Hartman:Lush\\_Life](http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Johnny_Hartman:Lush_Life)

<sup>58</sup> My thinking here is informed by Nathaniel Mackey's poetic riffs in his piece, "Cante Moro," featured in his collection, Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews.

life and its many, multiple incantations permeate through the feelings and music of *Killer of Sheep* itself?

September 2015

Dear Mr. Burnett,

The pain in my shoulder, my arm, my hand seems to be subsiding now. As I make my way into the mix of verses that proliferate around your work, for some reason I'm caught on a moment in *Sans Soleil/Sunless* where the French mixed media artist and film essayist, Chris Marker, captures some quite ordinary images of sleeping passengers on a ferry in Japan and reads into their figures the traces of nuclear war, imperceptible, outwardly vanished. The female narrator carefully notes, "He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time. Those memories whose only function had been to leave nothing behind but memories."<sup>99</sup> Perhaps this line, more than anything, seems to sum up so many of the images here, where the wound that exists between narrative and documentary surpasses techniques or intentions, where the light and shadow that passes through the two, between the two, gives a flash of what otherwise goes unseen and uncared for.

I find there are too many things to look at, and too many things looking at us. I remember that Professor Zeinabu Davis told us in production class that a shot in classical cinema used to last around seven seconds. Now it's less than that. There are far more cuts, but they do produce more meaning or more

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<sup>99</sup> Sans Soleil. Dir. Chris Marker. 1983.

distraction? I am left to wonder what is lost in those few seconds gone? Where does the sound and image that was supposed to exist disappear to, that primordial combination of effects that precedes the f/act of creation itself? What does it mean to pay less attention yet give more of it everywhere else, we who are so much slower and faster than before? I would surmise if *jump cuts* were meant to create *discontinuity* in the way we usually experience time, as an aesthetic strategy that attempts to make time go out of itself, then now, it is used as an aesthetic distraction that shows how much of our time is owned by structures other than ourselves and each other.

As a child, I wondered about the nature of loss even before there existed something to be lost, a knowledge of the darkness that came before the flickering of light against a screen, a strip. How does a child know regret before s/he knows desire?

In *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left*, Cynthia Young devotes her final chapter to the L.A. Rebellion film and expresses that “[forms]... are always social in the richest sense of the term, full of meanings that cannot be known in advance.”<sup>60</sup> I also learned from my recent foray into meditation practice that *forms are always impermanent*. Maybe that's the hinge for me, the sway between the social and the impermanent, the momentum of a door that leads me into the place that houses my ideas (graciously and even unconditionally). The social is always messy, unpredictable, even ugly, and infinitely complex, which is to say that the

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<sup>60</sup> See Cynthia A. Young's *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

social is always changing. What we capture in form, as the aesthetic vessel that is the culmination of a drive and a desire, is already something that has moved on. That distance, between the event and its passage, is what we must negotiate in our work. We create markers of that distance thru our work.

Earlier on, I thought it was the closeness of things I wanted to explore. And I admit, too, that this notion of closeness, the kinship that comes of blood or choice or creation, is what enables the movement to happen. It helps give meaning to the moves. I suppose I will spend my entire life seeking this closeness out. But it is the distance that ultimately obsesses me, the space between points, the drag between destinations. For is it not there that we spend so much of our lives? Is it not there where the search happens – that search to affirm life in spite of our dread of or resignation to its eventual extinguishment?

#### IV. *Close Readings*

Here: a momentary pause in which we steal some time away to play or try to imagine Dinah Washington's 1960 cut of "This Bitter Earth," featured in its entirety for a key sequence of this film. *Here*, her voice and its bluesy, sometimes boozy lamentations are brought back to life in spite of her own premature death in 1963, an untimely transference from the mortal vitriol and fatigue of racism, alcohol, and prescription pills into an unknowable beyond and *elsewhere*. *Here*, the voice is clarion and resurgent; Burnett's camera, patient, still, and unobtrusive, hanging back while the voice comes forward as if it were unspooling itself from the worn fabric of the furniture, a tone both

wry and stormy that resonates against the sparse living quarters whose darkness is only offset by the overexposure of a picture window, as a sound transforming space, a sound *becoming* space, framing and phrasing not what we are able to but what we *must* see.



Figure 2.3: Stan and his wife slow dancing in circles.

From the record player's scratch emits first the hackneyed lushness of a string ensemble and mixed chorus so characteristic of the lily-white cul-de-sacs of American popular music of the period. And were this a track by her contemporary, the milky blonde chanteuse, Patti Page, one could expect to be wrapped up in the gilded romances of an Allegheny moon or a trip to Cape Cod whose roads are protected for a select few by tolls, gateways, and housing covenants. Yet, the voice that enters is of a different place and time altogether. Her vibrato's sharp trill comes straight at the senses like a series of

sonic punches from its *elsewhere*, precise staccato notes held together by a fatal but defiant admixture of smoke and whiskey and just a touch of honey, its multiplications accompanying like a spirit the slow circles of desire and despair that transpire in this quiet dance between one, Stan, and his wife, unnamed.

Listen for now:

This bitter earth  
Well, what fruit it bears  
What good is love  
That no one shares  
And if my life is like the dust  
Mmm, that hides the glow of a rose  
What good am I  
Heaven only knows

Lord, this bitter earth  
Yes, can be so cold  
Today you're young  
Too soon you're old  
But while a voice within me cries  
I know heaven will answer my call  
And this bitter earth  
Ooh, may not be so bitter after all.<sup>61</sup>

Of this house and the block on which it dwells, the record that plays on in eternity and the lifetimes of touch that hang in the duration of the shot: Burnett gives a visual realization of the lyrical chiaroscuro and political impasse represented by the dust and the rose. For the rose so nearly eclipsed by the dust is drawn out to bloom through the definitive tremors of

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<sup>61</sup> Written by Clyde Otis, "This Bitter Earth" is the first track on Dinah Washington's 1960 LP, Unforgettable, and is heard not only in this pivotal scene but also in the closing of the film. Burnett actually used Washington's recording, "Unforgettable," in the original cut of the film, but due to an inability to obtain the copyright, repeated "This Bitter Earth" instead. [https://play.google.com/music/preview/Tgbin32dsscqoimjxao4vnkm3i?lyrics=1&utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=search&utm\\_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-lyrics](https://play.google.com/music/preview/Tgbin32dsscqoimjxao4vnkm3i?lyrics=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-lyrics)

Washington's voice, an epistemic murk broken apart by the silken caesura of her non-verbal emission of pleasure (that tantalizing "ooo") that threatens to become sentimental but stops, filling the room and embracing their bodies already lost in each other. *This bitter earth, can it be so cold? Today you're young, too soon you're old...* These are truths so bare as to be rendered bearable only by their banality: the present, dreary, and the future stamped *VOID* by the banks, the schools, especially the government. Time and place are a prison, the grandiose hopes of the Great Migration, the insurgency of the Black Panthers now ghosted and struggling to stay alive; and a confinement by an ever-present dusk signals the racial fault-lines of a country stacked against their kind and kin by the f/act of [their] Blackness, the simultaneous hope and unfulfillment of emancipation, the undelivered promissory notes.

By allowing us to observe them, to leave undisturbed their griefs *and* happiness, Burnett also gives back to Stan and his wife the infinite complexity of their humanity that they cannot find elsewhere, the very rinds of their Blackness that are stripped away from them as much as they are reduced to it, in the monotony of the slaughterhouse, the temptations of the hood, let alone a city, a country, and a world that seems *elsewhere* to the profound heaviness of the *here*. In this moment, though, they can just *be* without apology. And in their silent revolutions in the room, they are taken somewhere else, even if they cannot as yet voice to where or what that *somewhere else* is, giving them (and the audience) a dream of freedom, partial, inchoate, yet alive, and a gracious glimpse of how art and music can help us reach for the sublime even in the ragged contours of the everyday, from the scales of the quotidian to the

*cosmos* in the concrete, the cosmic reach from the ground. What remains for them is the physicality of their lives even as it threatens to flee them and an abandonment so cold and stark as to encroach upon the very frame of that self-same physicality like a rusted chain-link fence.

And yet – the brief conjuring of the flower lingers on in spite, *with spite*, even as Stan finally pushes aside his wife’s longing for sensuality, and she too has nowhere to push the thorns of her anguish than right up against the window pane. It’s a redemptive and even menacing biology whose beauty co-exists with the bitterness of the earth and whose axis of growth aspires past the empire of dirt and concrete that is Watts, towards the deferral of a heaven that they hope will one day “answer [their] call.” Before and after the fall, there must be and will be grace.

The scene is in effect a slow movement in the slow movement that is *Killer of Sheep* as cinema, a key largo orchestrated by Burnett's eye in concert with Washington. It demonstrates the force and affinity of music in his filmic sensibility – how music is not merely a backdrop but a meter and soul that drives the very grammar of his film language.

Here, another momentary pause to meditate on children, on labor, on Paul Robeson, and on his passport. The first voices we hear in the film are of two children, one older and one younger, singing without accompaniment, the lullaby “Lula.” *Do you want the stars to play with? Or the moon to run away with... In your mother’s arms you’re sleeping, and soon dawn will come creeping...* As the black screen dissolves into a close shot of young Stan’s face, their



voices, too, drown against his father's admonishments. Young Stan's eyes stare off into space as he barely listens before the camera pulls back to show his father, closely positioned but barely visible against the dark room. Stan's stare is both sullen and vacant, as if he is trying to flee the premises of his body and this house even as his father pulls him back. Stan's father tells him: "You're not a child anymore. You'll soon be a goddamn man. Now, start learning what life is about now, son." His mother who has been consoling Stan's crying brother, Henry, in the warmth of her belly, comes toward Stan with an ambiguous expression, then slaps him across the face. The scene fades out and again, "Lula" reappears to bookend the scene, but this time in the form of Paul Robeson's baritone voice.



Figure 2.4: Young Stan being told, "You'll soon be a goddamn man."

Violence and tenderness; love and pain; hope and humiliation. Of all the episodes that follow, this first sequence is the only one that is in flashback. The memory of young Stan's face is one that will echo in the undaunted stare of his daughter later in the film, when she stares out through the back window of his pick-up truck to bear witness to Stan and his friend Bracy who have saved up what little they can to buy a used motor that they gingerly carry over into the flatbed. The scene is almost a choreographic exercise in slapstick, however it is her face and its meaning that finds expression only in the interpolation of Scott Joplin's "Solace" that takes the scene from comedic to contemplative. Burnett's construction of Stan's childhood sets down the complex film grammar he will develop in this film. Visually, the frame is tightly constructed. The suggestion of the man he will "soon" become already begins to suffocate Stan's identity as a boy. Sonically, the array of voices, both sung and spoken, layer this memory of early pain with a statement of childhood innocence and its theft. Those children's voices will reemerge again on a shot of the factory where grownup Stan will work.

Mother's there, expecting me,  
 Father's waiting, too,  
 Lots of folks gathered there,  
 All the friends I knew  
 All the friends I knew.<sup>2</sup>

Accompanied only by piano, the profound bass of Paul Robeson's voice fades into the scene in the factory where Stan and his coworkers prepare the hooks and instruments that will lead to the slaughter of sheep. The fragment

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<sup>2</sup> This recording of "Lula" is taken from Robeson's Live from Carnegie Hall, May 9, 1958 concert album.

of the song, “Going Home,” underscores a shot of the animals as they are herded toward inevitable death. Can they anticipate what awaits them – the quick and bloody end and then their carcasses left suspended in air? In this accumulation of images – from children at play to men at work to animals on the move – the music is what lends Burnett’s visuals their poetic quality – each image, a verse, the visual movement of verse. “Going Home” is taken from the music of the third movement of Antonin Dvorak’s “Ninth Symphony,” and William Ash Fischer wrote lyrics in accompaniment and called the composition, “Going Home.” However, further study into the origins of the music shows that Dvorak, as a Czech immigrant to the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, found his musical inspiration in native and Black traditions. Dvorak wrote:

I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed to the United States. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them.<sup>63</sup>

I make transparent these details not to reinscribe a formalist reading of the song that would circumscribe the music to the realm of aesthetics alone. Rather, Fisher’s textual addition to a music that was already, by Dvorak’s own admission, heavily borrowed from a fascination with “Negro” music demonstrates *aesthetically* the heavy miscegenation of American cultural idioms as well as *politically* the reclamation of a “classical” form that could

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<sup>63</sup> Discover Classical Music: The Beginner’s Guide to Classical Music. (Saland Publishing, 2010), 296.

break from its insinuations of Blackness and crossover into the realm of “high” culture. However, the paradox of all these transgressions of borders and genres is that Robeson himself was an international figure who traveled and concertized the world extensively. At the height of the Cold War, then, his passport was revoked by the American government for speaking out against the architecture of white supremacy and racism whose “familiarity disguises its very horror” in the context of U.S. domestic society.<sup>64</sup> In fact, in the landmark 1951 document, *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People*, Paul Robeson and his son, are among the original signees. This recording of “Going Home,” taken from his Carnegie Hall recital in 1958, was given months *before* he won an appeal granting him use of his passport once more. Hence, Robeson sings for Stan and his sheep, the sheep that Stan slaughters and the sheep whose seeming passivity on the brink of disaster he may come to embody. His voice is what carries the structure of the moment, evoking a physical and spiritual home that may not even be South Central but extend even further to the diaspora of Blackness in the many Souths, be it the American or the Global, is also a voice singing from a place of exile, a stranger to one’s own country and to one’s own self.

V.

My fade out for this chapter takes me back to the fade in. I return to Joseph’s *Belhaven Meridian* in order to contemplate Watts one last time. No

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<sup>64</sup> Patterson, 4.

solid explanation is given for the meaning of the title. One imagines that Belhaven Meridian could be some odd, arcane citation, the stuff of sci-fi: perhaps a site for deep space exploration on an old episode of *Star Trek* or a destination in the Afrofuturism of an Octavia Butler novel. An informal perusal of a road map reveals that there are three Belhaven Avenues that exist in Los Angeles County. All of them are seemingly mundane and nondescript, places that, for the most part, appear on a Google search engine as recent home sales and real estate listings. The first two are located in Watts proper, separated by a distance of less than two miles. Running North and South, they are wedged in-between E. 92<sup>nd</sup> and E. 116<sup>th</sup> Streets with the 105 freeway looming overhead and accessible through South Central Avenue. The third Belhaven Avenue, on the other hand, is some 50 miles away, located somewhat ominously in Simi Valley, a drive that depending on the mercurial conditions of traffic at any given hour and on any given permutation of the 5, 405, 110, or 118 freeways could easily take an hour or more.

While “Watts, Los Angeles” appears in small type on-screen as a point of orientation, Simi Valley’s connection to Watts will go unmarked to the casual viewer. To anyone who has a working knowledge of Los Angeles history and news in the second half of the twentieth century, however, drawing a meridian between the two is a sly (dis)connection by way of geographic distance and socioeconomic discrepancy that does not go unnoticed. Say *Watts* and *Simi Valley*, and there are sudden flashes of 1965 and 1992, Marquette Frye and Rodney King, police violence and community

uprisings. Watts and Simi Valley could very well be the tale of two cities for the historical present always in a state of crisis.

From the Latin *meridies*, meaning noon or south, a meridian is a line, an imagination, a movement. Cartographers will mark a meridian as the longitude that passes in half or full circles from North to South Poles. Acupuncturists will use the meridians of the human body to gauge the flow of vital energy. A meridian is both particularity and universality. Playing on these permutations of meridian, *Belhaven Meridian* maps out an alternative sonic and narrative cartography of Watts whose sense of longitude and latitude, altitude and *attitude* is a series of riddles upon riddles, refusing the rationalized violence of Cartesian coordinates whose directed lines can quarter space into fragments, sliding instead under the radar of state-sanctioned modes of documentation that historically and structurally overwrite this space and the peoples who live there. Joseph's work echoes the politics and art that spring forth from the frame of the decolonial, the Third, and the South, which is to say his vision permeates through a lens that emanates squarely from the bottom and below of American society.

These alternative lines are powerful. They beseech us to reach for a space and time beyond the contemporary moment marked by the daily, ongoing iterations and entrenchments of white supremacist, anti-Black racisms that rupture, again and again, the "fictive slavery/freedom borderline," the fictions that form the basis of democracy, capitalism, and

citizenship.<sup>65</sup> As such, I signal with my words an ethical *response-ability* to the rebellions that are currently being waged in the streets of American cities like Charleston, Baltimore, New York, Cleveland, Ferguson, Los Angeles, and Oakland that call to *disorder* the grim and grotesque ways that Black lives *do not* matter and are *made* not to matter through the terrorizing regimes of invasive poverty, police brutality, militarized surveillance, and mass incarceration, among the brute tactics that characterize the arsenal of legal and extralegal violence that saturate both the spectacular and the quotidian.

That this collective artistic statements of Joseph and Shabazz Palaces draws its own meridian vis-à-vis Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* shows how the earlier film's counternarration of America still addresses the grim realities of racism, white supremacy, and capitalism the continue in spite of the post-racial rhetoric that was and is trumpeted with the first term election of President Barack Obama. These meridians are important for my chapter in that I suggest Burnett's film re-imagines a series of sonic cartographies through its soundscape, one that draws linkages between history, space, place, self, community, and Blackness.

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<sup>65</sup> Dennis Childs. *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration From the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

## Chapter 2:

### **“Do they hold as much mystery for you as they do for me?”: On Jean-Pierre Gorin’s Documentary Clocks and the Aesthetics of Improvisation**

When you do a film, it’s a certain way to play with your own desire; it’s the way you project yourself into history. This political projection lies in the form of the film. Politics is not a matter of content, it’s a matter of form and expression, and when you are making a film, you are dealing with that. What is a film? Take the phenomenon of editing. Editing is exactly the process through which you disconnect a certain reality in order to reconnect it in another way. If you don't break completely with the notion that in films you have to produce realistic effects, then you get nowhere. There is a non-realistic way to be more realistic, and that is exactly what we are into...

We are in a mad structure cut away from our roots by some cold monster which is ruling class ideology. We have to break with our own individualities and to stop referring to the working class as an abstraction. Our search must be for concrete bodies here and now. Che was right when saying that a true revolutionary has in himself a great feeling of love, and I am not being metaphysical saying that. I am being really materialistic. There is a point where in a certain state of mind the spirit gets back the overwhelming experience of matter. Then you are at a point where there is no such thing as good and bad, despair, and joy. You're beyond those contradictions, and everything is complete and total experience. In revolutionary moments, that’s what the masses are looking for. May 68 was a very total experience. People were talking and dancing in the streets and doing all sorts of crazy things. When you have passed through that, you want it to happen again and again.

-Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1974

#### *Prelude*

This chapter is devoted to an *aesthetics of improvisation* that emerges in the documentary film practices of the French expatriate filmmaker, Jean-Pierre Gorin, between 1968 and 1992. While improvisation has recently begun to



accrue interest as an *academic* currency, one wagers that its very properties of spontaneity, surprise, and *live-ness* make it difficult to fixate through the rigor (mortis) of a stultifying disciplinarity. One monograph, however, that balances improvisation's playfulness while illuminating its consequence to revolutionary politics is *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and The Ethics of Cocreation* where the trio of co-authors define it as "an important social, musical, and ethical practice for understanding and generating the potential forms of cocreation – deeply relational, profoundly contingent."<sup>66</sup> Improvisation is a crucial site of emergence, where new organizations and relations of space, sound, and bodies that are undefined by current civil society can be glimpsed, rehearsed, practiced, and experienced, if even in passing. Improvisation makes eccentric the notion of culture as commodious for distribution, circulation, and consumption. It can push against and through the bounds of what is expected, acceptable, and legible to the "commonsense."

Improvisation is never planned, although planning, paradoxically, can set up the conditions of possibility for these moments to make the leap from mental construct to lived reality – or not. As such, improvisation is about having what George Lipsitz through the work of Walter Benjamin identifies as "presence of mind," about knowing where you are and what time it is. Thus while future-bound and in search of an expression that is not yet *here*, improvisation involves possessing a "precise awareness" in one's presence in

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<sup>66</sup> Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz. *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xi-xii.

the present in order to get *there*.<sup>67</sup> One frequently cited instance is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic (and endlessly (mis)appropriated) "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington in August 1963. While the theme of the dream had its anticipatory iterations in earlier speeches King gave in Birmingham and Detroit, the eponymous phrase was not in the final notes he took to the rostrum. As he was winding down his oratory, the gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, who was in the wings, called out, "Tell them about the speech, Martin!," to which he went *off* speech and started to preach through improvisation. In this example, one sees not only the incredible response that is "freed up" through the call but also how improvisation's eruption here fulfills a quantum possibility and profound re-visioning of the world that was only hinted at leading up to the event.<sup>68</sup>

Showing how context and content conditions the form through the locus of improvisation enables one to see how form is constantly *transformed* through dialectical detours. The *transformations* of form – in this case, the *documentary* form – makes lucid the *socioformal* dimensions of all cultural productions. I seek to shed light on how improvisation, as a radically creative/creatively radical openness to critical differences and collective collaborations is central to Gorin's work in documentary film practices. Gorin expresses that his earlier work in the 1960s and 1970s constitute "bizarre

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<sup>67</sup> George Lipsitz. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>68</sup> Drew Hansen. "Mahalia Jackson, and King's Improvisation." *New York Times* Op-Ed, 27 August 2013 [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/opinion/mahalia-jackson-and-kings-rhetorical-improvisation.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/opinion/mahalia-jackson-and-kings-rhetorical-improvisation.html?_r=0)

attempts at building clocks” through film.<sup>6</sup> I extend these “documentary clocks” through roughly a twenty year period to illustrate the problematics of his earlier works and the way he is able to provide resolutions for those issues. Gorin’s “presence of mind” enables him to provide probing looks at war, revolution, imperialism, and immigration as they span across the geographies of France, Vietnam, Palestine, Southern California, and the South Pacific. His method, too, changes with respect to his variegated visual inquiries. This chapter, then, is a time-traveling critique and a simulation of the open-ended essayistic practice, providing, along the way, three case studies of Gorin’s films. First, I provide a look into two documentary experiments, *Letter to Jane* (1972) and *Ici et Ailleurs* (1975), from his partnership with Jean-Luc Godard through the Dziga Vertov Group (1968-1972) in France. I think about the artistic impact and legacy of American painter and artist Manny Farber (1917-2008) as it relates to the sea change that occurs in Gorin’s visual methodologies in his trans-Atlantic movement from France to San Diego, California. Finally, I commune with the final installment of his Southern California trilogy, the little seen *My Crasy Life* (1992), cutting into the quotidian codes of one Samoan Crips gang as they are set against the geographical triangulation of Long Beach, California; the U.S.-occupied Kingdom of Hawai’i; and American Samoa. Set in the historical *near present* of the early 1990s, the film’s universe is worlded in the disowned and derelict zones of the U.S. empire and weary

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<sup>6</sup> This is taken from Gorin’s lecture, “The Dziga Vertov Group: Lecture with Clips by Jean-Pierre Gorin,” at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive on September 24, 2014. During his more than three hours of speaking time, he showed a series of clips and discussed the politically radical, experimental film collective he co-founded with Jean-Luc Godard.

because of it – contemporaneous to the catastrophic fallout of trickle down economics and a coercive War on Drugs, a forward dispatch for the Los Angeles Police Department’s disreputable exoneration from their brutality of an African American man, Rodney King, an extrajudicial violence that erupted in the firestorm of the 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion. From the mediated maelstroms of these controlling images, Gorin and the “crazy life” of the gangsters place into relief the contentions of objectivity that confine documentary and work together through the tangled pathological knots that range from Margaret Mead’s biological determinations of Samoan culture in the 1920s to the mass media’s hypercriminalization of youth of color in the 1980s.

I.

*JP, Manny, and Me, or The Improvisation of Termites*

One thing I have learned from watching Gorin’s output is the way he situates his own positionality within every work, splintering the filmic illusion of objectivity. In this way, I make transparent my own as well. In the year 2004, I am 21 and two years into my major course of study in Ethnic Studies, the only academic space and discipline I can find in the university to provide me with the threshold of a language to articulate the complex of logics and problems that arise from the vexed position of *the other* and *the outsider*, the one who exists and is forced to exist in a state of alienation in relation to the triumphal and tempestuous machinations of American political and economic domination. It’s a position familiar to me as a Korean American culled out of

the raging, eruptive tensions of a working class immigrant household in a historical moment that Reaganomics-Thatcherism trumpets as global capitalism's victory against global Communism's defeat with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991). Yet, the "freedoms" that are produced by these twinned events compose a cacophonous geopolitical prelude for the violent, unceasing encroachments of U.S. imperialism into the Middle East (1991, 2003) in ways that mount a repetition with a difference of the belligerent Cold War trail of bombs, bases, and bodies in the Asia/Pacific (1898, 1946, 1959, too many others) that occurs in apposition to the upsurge of Clintonian neoliberal governmentality that yields draconian cuts in social welfare for the undocumented (1994), abolishes Affirmative Action programs (1996), and eliminates bilingual education in public schools (1998) in one fell swoop.

I grow up in a time of compounded foreclosures on the possibilities of youth of color, sold off to a bureaucracy of dis-interest where their intrinsic value is appraised and subtracted by way of defunded public schools and overfunded corporate prisons maintained by the functions of "middle management." I only draw out this summary of events with a premeditated discursive density, not because I wish to recapitulate a linearity of inevitable imperial and national violence. Rather, these events speak, however incompletely, to de-obfuscate the collective amnesia that forms the palimpsestic present that informs the multiple temporal landscapes of *My Crasy Life* and the co-production of sublimating terrorism and fetishized

consumerism that are unleashed as “the boomerang effect of colonization” that Aimé Césaire so powerfully diagnoses in *Discourse on Colonialism* in 1955.<sup>70</sup> As a manifesto I prophetically encounter in the month before the U.S. invasion of Iraq during the week of my twentieth birthday in March 2003, my reading of Césaire’s militant poetics that defies generic convention offers me an alternative to the primacy of domestically bound law and sociology that comprise the bulk of my studies and their at times arid classifications that have difficulty in accounting for the messy, intractable, and transnational forces that place their challenge on the lived experience, forces that resist the restrictions of disciplinary and territorial explanation and refuse their object status as a research agenda. I’m drawn instead to the polyphony of inconsistencies, ambiguities, and ambivalences that occur through the aesthetic structures of film, art, and literature, mediums that allow the material force of these contradictions to be sustained through the playfulness of their engagements with form and content, address and audience. As a result, I begin to use my available units each quarter to moonlight in the Literature and Visual Arts Departments.

By the time I have my first encounter with Jean-Pierre Gorin, it is the Spring Quarter of my junior year in 2004, and my course load, at any given time, may consist of an Ethnic Studies class taken alongside memory and trauma in postwar German cinema, classical Chinese poetry in translation,

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<sup>70</sup> Césaire’s writing in *Discourse on Colonialism* is formative to my understanding of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy on a world scale and helps to provide a flexible model for thinking through the documentary problems that Gorin grapples with throughout his political and cinematic career.

film musicals, or the aesthetics of garbage in Latin America. At times, I'm left unsure how to reconcile the parallel tracks that exist in my academic life: hard-hitting analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the organization of labor, land, and capitalism, on one hand and seemingly impenetrable theories of poststructuralism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis in the production of the image, on the other. I silently question, how does cultural production trouble the unbendingly structural analyses of power and inequality, and how does the specter of race truncate the problematic revivification of colorblindness in high theory? Moreover, I've harbored an encyclopedic knowledge of classical Hollywood cinema nursed since childhood from cannibalizing whatever feature happened to be playing on television after school and on weekends. Be it B-movie or musical, film noir or screwball comedy, my furtive viewership of these movies form the basis of an alternative, if idiosyncratic, education of America, serving as a reprieve and an interval from what I early interpret to be the high stress of family life and the absolute mediocrity of school while teaching me to master the rules of the game in black and white and in Technicolor, the national projection of fantasies, delusions, and perversities that make up the manipulative sum of American life and culture. No one else I know growing up shares this strange and all-consuming obsession for the movies – but the exactitude and passion of this eidetic memory I have for forms, genres, movements, actors, directors, and dates will prove useful for their later deconstruction.

The class I've not so much enrolled in as stumbled into is *VIS 154: Hard Look at Films*, one that Gorin inherits from the American painter and critic,

Manny Farber, who was responsible for its creation as a course during his teaching career at UCSD from 1970 until his retirement in 1987. It's a class with a storied history, and one description of Farber's unorthodox pedagogical style goes like this:

It wasn't necessarily what he had to say (he was prone to shrug off his most searching analysis as 'gobbledegook') so much as it was the whole way he went about things, famously showing films in pieces, switching back and forth from one film to another, ranging from Griffith to Godard, Bugs Bunny to Yasujiro Ozu, talking over them with or without sound, running them backward through the projector, mixing in slides of paintings, sketching out compositions on the blackboard, the better to assist students in seeing what was in front of their faces, to wean them from Plot, Story, What Happens Next, and to disabuse them of the absurd notion that a film is all of a piece, all on a level, quantifiable, rankable, fileable.<sup>71</sup>

What is apparent here is a radical exposure, the preparedness to test and to try in spite of right or wrong results (right or wrong is besides the point), and to construct the foundations of an idea even if it is going to be subject to demolition in the very next breath. Although I am not yet aware of who Manny Farber is, this move to actively dismantle the bourgeois conditioning of how to teach, how to learn, and how to read a film (all three conceived of through the *bildungsroman* tradition of beginning-middle-end, the development of the narrated self towards rationality, maturity, and completion) is embedded in the structure of the class itself. Gorin begins the ten weeks with no concern for the formal procedure of a syllabus and lectures well beyond the the allotted three-hour time slot, stressing the "physicality

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Polito. "Other Roads, Other Tracks." Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber. (New York: Library of America, 2009), xv-xxxviii.



and materiality” of the image while daring any of us to leave the room before he is finished talking – even if the clock is ticking towards 10:30PM. He is pithy, poetic, frequently profane, but all the while deeply personal. If “it wasn’t necessarily what [Farber] had to say... so much as it was the whole way he went about things” is any indication, Gorin, too, produces a maze of clips, asides, and references that hopscotch over the pretensions of a capitalized “Film History,” “auteur theory,” or Foucauldian analysis. While he makes polemical asides about Quentin Tarantino as a con artist and Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* as torture pornography, I am most impressed by his painterly riffs on watching for the details and gestures in the frame, the way objects are being placed and moved in relation to others: the frenetic run of an escaped chicken in the beginning of *City of God* (2002) that emits the only real “life” in its depiction of the Brazilian favelas; the devastating dance of a barefoot housewife in the sprinklers that embodies suburban meltdown in John Cassavetes’ *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974); or the stream of smoke from a speeding train that signals the (loco)motion of colonial modernity that cuts across a field of kala flowers as two young children watch in wonder in Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (1955). These ten weeks form the basis of my second education in film.

Examining a few of the political and artistic movements that figure into the temporal landscapes of Jean-Pierre Gorin’s work helps to draw out a suggestive but always unfinished line, one that extends from the radical Marxist/Maoist politics of post-May 1968 in Paris to his motley crew of

documentary subjects who reside in the margins of Southern California. Certainly a great and seemingly incommensurable distance separates the ideological and imaginative milieus that are evoked by these two worlds; however, the unlikelihood of ex-Maoist intellectualism and Samoan street gangsterism converge, serendipitously, in the evolution of Gorin's life and art. In many ways, the dramatic shifts that occurred in his aesthetic disposition and practice after his departure from France is shaped by his friendship with the Manny Farber, whose alternately kinetic and cantankerous film criticism is crystallized in his famous 1962 essay-cum-manifesto, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art":

Movies have always been suspiciously addicted to termite-art tendencies. Good work usually arises where the creators (Laurel and Hardy, the team of Howard Hawks and William Faulkner operating on the just half of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*) seem to have no ambitions towards gilt culture but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or for anything. A peculiar fact about termite- tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.<sup>72</sup>

Against the annual deluge of "white elephant" films whose gift is a grand sweeping routine obviously engineered to win major awards, Farber is an early champion of films made on shoestring budgets whose potency is derived from their lean, cunning ecology that makes use of the centrifugal force of all their weird, unwieldy details. The point of termite art never arrives at one. Before one can find the point, all that is left are the ruins of what has already been chewed up. The thing itself that is already disappeared leaves

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<sup>72</sup> Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," 135.

behind only its traces. Termite art is not about enlarging the particularity to the point where its vessels are cut off but rather burrowing inside them to find out the quirks, nerves, and eccentricities firsthand. Farber's *entomological* equation of film practice with the termite is by no means stuck in the impasse of Kafka's existential vermin. Belonging to the same family as the just as reviled cockroach, any casual internet search of termites will not summon details of their biology but rather prompt one to contact with speed a bevy of local options for their biological extermination. One can wonder how this subterranean, sub-structural, eusocial creature, small as they are, terribly collaborative, stuck with a "limited intelligence," and seemingly always on the verge of being killed, manages to prevail through the centuries in their building of colonies and their nourishment by cellulose:

The animals that make the most intricate and orderly structures tend to be ones with more limited intelligence," says John Wenzel, an entomologist and expert on wasp nests at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pennsylvania. "Instead of starting at zero and learning everything each generation, they have a baseline of innate, instinctive behavior that can be polished up relatively quickly through successive generations of natural selection."<sup>73</sup>

One of Farber's early jobs was as a carpenter, and given his familiarity with wood, construction, and scale, it is a profound irony that he elevates the mass of termites into the realm of aesthetics and views its denigrated consumption as a form of labor (however useless) and its survival against the odds through a distinctly proletarian lens. In his film criticism, Farber brings a

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<sup>73</sup> Lee Billings. "The Termite and the Architect." *Nautilus* 8 (2013). <<http://nautil.us/issue/8/home/the-termite-and-the-architect>>

skeptical, squinting, side-eye glance to the frame – in a relentless meandering and interrogation. He has an insatiable attention to the physicality of the bodies he watches on-screen – the way lines, expressions, muscles, motions twist, turn, twitch, and trouble the expected – that also plays into his words; words that seem to run away from him as soon as he puts them down to page, like the haphazard scurry and consumption of termites that are on the prowl, existing in margins that they simultaneously create and annihilate.

In this sense, I suggest “termite art” as a lens for engaging in documentary film practice provides rich connections and not just in a misguided 1:1 ratio that often transpires in the exchange between human and non-human organisms in the realm of biomimetics. Rather, if “[a]daptability, improvisation, and invention are the weapons of the weak,” termites in their non-productive labor and movement offers a transgression of walls, borders, and boundaries that confine culture and people. What is at stake is how life is documented as well as the fictions that go into producing it.

### III.

#### *Case Study: The Dziga Vertov Group and You, Jane!*

With the 52 minutes that construct the short film essay, *Letter to Jane: An Investigation About a Still* (1972), Gorin and his then cultural co-worker and co-interlocutor, Jean-Luc Godard, stage their final encounter, a visual ideological punch launched through the banner of their film collective, the Dziga Verov Group (henceforth referred to as DVG) (1968-72). With their stated objective of making films *politically* as opposed to making *political* films (or, making

political films *politically*), the DVG's name started in humor as an homage to the serious Soviet film documentarian, newsreel director, and cinema theorist, Dziga Vertov, whose stream of kinetic agitprop dispatched as *Kino-Pravda* ("Film Truth") spoke to his allied enthusiasm for Marxist ideology and film technology to capture visions of life in the newly established USSR of the 1920s. The DVG represented a short-lived but intensely productive cultural mobilization project that eschewed with individualized authorship/auteurship while aggressively pursuing the creation of a new revolutionary film vocabulary – *forms* and *techniques* – that would respond to the accrued devastation in Southeast Asia and the consequences of the general strikes and occupations of factories and universities that shook the shifting grounds of Parisian civil society in May 1968.

Of course, granted Godard's fame in France and overseas (especially on the American university circuit), it was hard for the DVG to break free of the Godardian authority in and about these films when one sifts through histories of the group or his overall career. And while Godard and Gorin wished to engage in new modes of cinematic production and distribution, much of the funding was actually sourced on the strength of Godard's name and funneled in from private investors and public television. If anything, the DVG was and is still regarded as an anomaly within Godard's career and its films, given an inequitable reputation for being too abstract or too political, curio items that are generally unwatchable. While these films remain hard to track down beyond rare and expensive overseas DVDs or grainy internet uploads that fail to do justice to their formal aesthetic properties, they merit a renewed critical

attention in a current media landscape monopolized by the white noise of a few powerful conglomerates, especially in the sense that they represent a willingness to critique, to create, and to fail in the process of radically rethinking the parameters of what constitutes a film. Of them, *Letter to Jane* (1972) is as readily accessible as it is highly controversial. Extending the fundamental concern that characterizes their feature-length film, *Tout Va Bien* (1972) – of which American actress Jane Fonda was the lead and to which *Jane* serves as a caustic postscript and counterpoint – Godard and Gorin “dig” into the functions of the celebrity film star as she pertains (or does not pertain) to the revolutionary class struggle.

Bristling with a confrontational stance set through the textual conventions of the epistolary form, Godard and Gorin’s insistent chain of *Dear Jane’s* doesn’t so much convene on as much as it entreats and surrounds with sound the infamous photograph that features Fonda during her much-discussed trip to Northern Vietnam. This photo “taken by Joseph Kraft and released for circulation to the press by the North Vietnamese government-controlled news agency” was printed on July 31, 1972 by the French daily evening newspaper, *L’Express*, and was met by an international public that mercilessly vilified Fonda as “Hanoi Jane,” a moniker whose contentious array of implications cast her in the abject light of antiwar activist and counterculture icon that still lingers on her public image to this day.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> James Roy MacBean. Film and Revolution (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 174.



Figure 3.1: The infamous photograph that sparked a media firestorm.

In the form of a caveat and a legitimization for this film, Godard and Gorin venture that:

[a]s a woman you will undoubtedly be hurt a little, or a lot, by the fact that we are going to criticize a little, or a lot, your way of acting in this photograph. Because once again, as usual, *men are finding ways to attack women* (emphasis mine).

This rhetorical chauvinism barely disguised as autocritique does little to deter the aggressive tag-team battle of words that takes place over and on Fonda in the territory of their semiotic cipher. One might consider the timing of *Letter's* arrival after the delivery of *Tout Va Bien*. After a series of radical experiments that had broken apart the illusions of traditional narrative (and which had also garnered polarized critical and commercial response), Godard and Gorin made *Tout* as a “[return] to a more populist – and less sectarian – political mode” – what they playfully referred to as a stylistically deconstructed *Love*

*Story* set in the middle of a sausage factory wildcat strike.<sup>75</sup> Figuring in the marital anxieties of a French commercial director and American news broadcaster respectively played by Yves Montand and Jane Fonda, the characters' unwitting capture and overnight stay become a set-up by way of Bertold Brecht on the changes in political subjectivity and the gender and sexual politics of class under the rising tide of consumer capitalism in the immediate post-1968 moment. In *Tout*, the moving image of Fonda who realizes in her witnessing of this labor breakdown that she, as an expatriate correspondent in Paris, "corresponds to nothing" is frozen here, in *Letter*, and forced to surrender all meaning under Godard and Gorin's intense and supposedly "scientific" scrutiny.

The sudden dismissal of gender and sex altogether as nothing more than a series of personal attacks and individual hurts (the Jane in the photo and her relation to Jane the actress who was convinced by Gorin to star in their film and Jane the woman who is reduced to attacks on feelings) tumbles into a masculinist aesthetic choreography of angles, positions, and juxtapositions that imposingly explores the perilous proximity of the photo as found footage and its exterior relations to the events of the world that are suggested within and without its margins. In effect, the photo representation of Jane Fonda as well as the Northern Vietnamese soldiers who are erroneously captioned by the newspaper as answering her questions at times become swallowed up by the dazzling virtuosity of form and technique

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<sup>75</sup> J. Hoberman. "Tout va bien Revisited." 14 February 2005  
<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/356-tout-va-bien-revisited>



themselves. The visual competitively framed against the verbal, the dual and oftentimes overlapping voices travel at breakneck speeds through a series of what they call “detours,” repeatedly stalling and starting their arguments and agitating the formal linearity that characterizes the conventions of Hollywood cinematic principle.

Suspended on the circuitous lines of more and more discourse, Godard and Gorin attack the barrage and collusion of social, political, and economic forces whose meanings simmer and emit like a radioactivity from the photo. The machinery of Western imperialist violence in the Third World, the omniscient stare of American celebrity culture, and the stony erasure of Vietnamese claims to sovereignty are consigned, conflated, and cast beside to the “tragedy” of Jane Fonda’s multiply reproduced visage that is placed alongside her own star turn in *Klute* (1971), her father Henry Fonda in the liberal fascist fare of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *Young Mister Lincoln* (1939), and John Wayne in *The Green Berets* (1969):

The facial expression of the militant in this photograph is in fact that of a tragic actress, a tragic actress with a particular social and technological background, formed and deformed by the Hollywood school of show-biz and Stanislavski.

When they emphatically intone, *You, Jane*, the words erupt as a hail, a command, a smear, and an address whose delivery, in repetition and in difference, delineates the veritable collapse of *Jane Fonda as film actress*, *Jane Fonda as photograph*, and *Jane Fonda as living person*, until the *Jane* that refracts the ire of their analysis circles back to the flatness of the surface of the eerily silent/silenced image itself. This flatness, too, is one they highlight in

repositioning to the fore the forms of the Northern Vietnamese soldiers who are si(gh)ted inside this photograph by the mass media as a disembodied cap or a blurred face in the background: demoted to mere accoutrements rather than complex embodiments of their own political struggle, the commodified fetish objects that sustain the aura and authenticity of the manufacture of Jane Fonda's celebrity turn. Yet, they, too, are just as flat and silent as Jane. Godard and Gorin's last word in the film and by extension as a Group signals the didactic concern and urgency that *we* the consumers of a political noise increasingly saturated by the capitalist modes of production must undo the market engineering of our deafening illogic and in turn *listen* to the Vietnamese and by extension the many shouts of the Third World subaltern in an age of Cold War decolonization. *We* should listen for the contradictions; however, it is an advice dispensed outwards that disenables them from affording themselves the same critical concern.

While *Letter's* merits and missteps have been much debated, I'm interested in the fluency of the *ear* that they place against and alongside the privileging of the *eye*, through the unequivocal demands that we must stop talking in order to begin the important task of listening. This demand will again find its future echo in the elegiac finale of a film that was begun under the auspices of the DVG as *Jusqu'a la victoire (Until Victory)* but finally arrives in the quiet form of *Ici et Ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere)* (1976). It's a film that was originally commissioned by the Arab League in 1970 but six years later, after the departure of Gorin and the addition of Anne-Marie Miéville, becomes an experiment in new video technology and a meditation on documentary

practice itself for those dead by the Jordanian army in Black September.<sup>76</sup> Images of children in training for armed struggle once perceived by Godard and Gorin as the bright future of revolution now become a chain of images on mourning irretrievable losses. *Jusqu'à la victoire* is intended to be a "militant political film" in much the same way Jane Fonda's image in *Letter* intends her to be a "militant Hollywood actress." After Godard's car accident, after the dissolution of the DVG, and after the departure of Gorin, the reconstituted film is a different object: not so much a "political film" intent on its own rightness of politics but rather a questioning of what a "political film" is at all.



Figure 3.2: "Death is represented in film as a flow of images"

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<sup>76</sup> Erik Ulman. "Jean-Pierre Gorin." *Dziga Vertov Group* (São Paulo: witz edições, 2005), 40.

Here, I would suggest that the ear restored and *resounding* to its connection to the eye in the sensory acquisition of the image also conceives of a *reimagined* relationship and participation with the image that can work inside and beyond capital's proprietary mandates over it. *The ear and the eye* with their attachments to the body in motion in space will further a wild, unpredictable search for putting together another political critique *and* possibility of life and living in this world. *Ici et Ailleurs*, with its back and forth shot, countershot of a middle class Parisian family as *ici* (here) and the re-edited footage of Palestinian past as *ailleurs* (elsewhere), the importance, as the film intones, is in the *et* (and) that forms the hinge and undoes the Manichean oppositions that are reified through an illusive orotundity that masks the brutality of warfare and colonialism. Regardless of what is *ici et ailleurs*, we must listen to the succession of what exists between them. With *Letter to Jane*, then, we have one such modest example of the materiality of film that is stripped bare to the bass notes of its structure – the effects that are created through the arrangement of image and sound – that showcases the primacy of a form that has the capacity to break and orchestrate, decenter and center. These calculated actions sprint against the continuity of classical cinema's own image of the eternal and out of the dust of its dismantlement create material shocks and open up a different kind of political music shared by a fragmentary "I" and an always provisional "we." *Jane* thus provides one working definition and point of departure through which to contemplate on the problems of documentary method, representation, distribution, and reception, not to mention the category of what constitutes *documentary* itself.

## III.

By the time he made *My Crasy Life* (1992), Gorin had honed his craft in the construction of a pair of film essays, *Poto and Cabengo* (1980) and *Routine Pleasures* (1986), that delved into the temporal landscapes of language, assimilation, alienation in San Diego, digging deep inside the form of the documentary until he reaches its representational limits. *My Crasy Life* is never meant to be a documentary in the purist sense of the term, not a possessive bid on the “authentic” but rather, a performative remix of the very terms that constitute the categories of “fact” and “fiction,” a stylized assemblage of poetic truths for those he seeks to represent. He builds a film about, around, through, and with his subjects that is wily, unyielding, and frequently combustible, insistently slipping away from easy classifications.

If he has always had an interest in developing new relations between cinematic sight and sound, what emerges from the line is a sense of *improvisation*, usually figured as an extemporaneous practice in musical composition or a creative exercise of human expression, but one that can offer a flexible, mobile framework for understanding the dis/orientations of his workmanship. Improvisation, too, can also help to pick apart the aesthetic regimes of *objectivity* and *truth* that tend to overdetermine documentary as a structure and provide new insights for how documentary can be used as a working ethic of co-creation.

In reading this film’s multiple and multidirectional movements through space and time, I first note how Gorin’s mixture of documentary, ethnography, fiction, science fiction, among others, makes it hard to locate. In

many ways, his traversal of genres is as restless as the movement of the Samoans themselves. As such, I am indebted to the theoretical style and innovation of Native Pacific scholars, Vicente Diaz and J. Kehaulani Kauanui who set down the political and epistemological stakes and states of a *critical Pacific Islander Studies* project as predicated on Stuart Hall's theory of articulation.<sup>7</sup> Articulation necessarily points to the realm of discourse, through speech acts and utterances through which one's positionality is enunciated in *difference*, but as well, articulation is the joining together of components that are not necessarily in a predetermined unity. Hall's classic example of the lorry is one that illustrates this concept – in hooking and unhooking, linking and delinking – pointing to how these made connections are *constructed*, *constrained*, and most importantly, *contingent*. Thus, instead of rigid confrontations of power and hegemony, Hall's model offers a widescreen view across a political terrain of continuing struggles and constantly shifting alliances shaped by the specificities of a given historical moment. Hence, when these articulations lose their exigency or coherence (say, in the form of a political coalition forged by two or more groups), they can also be disbanded and *disarticulated*. The other element of articulation, then, is that as much as it provides a theory of *change over time and space*, it also compels an interrogation of continuity beyond a historical vacuum, for example, with enduring architectures like *capitalism* or *white supremacy*, through specific cultural symbols and political blocs.

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<sup>7</sup> Vicente Diaz and J. Kehaulani Kauanui. "Native Pacific Cultural Studies on the Edge." *The Contemporary Pacific* 13.2 (Fall 2001), 315-341.

Thus, the usefulness of articulation for Diaz and Kauanui is that it also offers a flexible and mobile way of conceiving of the force and function of ideology and the ways in which its terms are always up for negotiation and without guarantees. Articulation becomes a methodologically useful tool for thinking of the palimpsests of the Pacific, as it is drawn up and quartered by imperial and militarized cartographies yet attentive to the ways in which its islands and inhabitants precede and even exceed these very political and cultural conventions. Diaz and Kauanui posit the triangulation of Native Studies, Pacific Islander Studies, and Cultural Studies in order to trace these cross-cultural currents and the mutually productive relationship between roots and routes of its “sea of islands (Eveli Hoa’fa), its “islands of history” (Marshall Sahlins), or perhaps, the *worlding* that is suggested by *Oceania* in place of the Pacific. Their project is for one invested in the politics of local cultural production as they are shaped by but not reduced to the contests of nationalism, globalization, militarism, and diaspora. As well, they urge the significance of centering the relationships between kinship and land in order to better understand native travel and movement. As such, this also speaks to an epistemological and political project that runs counter to the usual Area Studies and anthropological discourses that utilize deracinating Western standards of research and empiricism and instead, orients an island and Islander-centered one in its stead, one that is moving and on the move.

But let the Natives speak for themselves.

Early on, *The 2001: A Space Odyssey* HAL knockoff computer situated on the dash of the Hawaiian cop, Sergeant Jerry Kaono, computes the mocking

rhetorical question, “you want to learn more about Samoan gangs?” with the empirically flat and one note response, “DATA!” This is subsequently parodied by the computer screen scrolling through a series of card catalog entries of generally Western anthropological titles on the Samoan Islands devoted to their traditions, customs, adaptations, and even modernization as it corresponds with menstrual cycles. In response to this hail, we face off with the sarcastic bravado of one of the “OG” (or *original gangster*) homies who waves down the off-screen director from the shores of American Samoa and bristles and schools him and by extension us against this breezy interpellation. He knowingly sneers, an expression that juts out of the critical ignition of scripting and improvisation:

Motherfuckers are in the wrong fucking place. Fuck Margaret Mead. That’s M-E-A-D. BBC. PBS. All that National Geographical bullshit. I’ll tell you where it’s at. West Side S.O.S. Sons of Samoa 32<sup>nd</sup> Street. That’s Long Beach, where the beaches are long. That’s where you go if you wanna make a movie. You go out toward that way.

Pointing his stick back towards California, we look into the watery space of the very direction from which the white anthropologists came. The salience of this simultaneous *disorientation* and *remapping* is to *articulate* a different production of space and time that is often desecrated into emptiness and how the vastness of the ocean has never been a barrier but rather a busy highway through which people, ideas, commodities, and cultures collide, collude, exchange, and interact. At once pushing outwards while pulling in, I am after the (com)motions of search that restlessly and even relentlessly shuttle back and forth between the creation of individual selves as they are bounded up



with the group, and the scale of city blocks that are somehow always entreated by the distant music of the South Pacific whose ancestral sound waves rebuke and whose waters run far past the Great White Way(s) of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Since this is in its broadest terms a film about youth, it is fitting that an image of childhood should saturate the opening sequence of *My Crazy Life*, but one whose lush Technicolored spell will soon be punctured by the punitive conditions of physical and psychic violence, transgression, and incarceration that adolescence and young adulthood may bring: in the opening scene, though, we meet a group of Samoan girls and boys who are involved in a spirited round of *rock, paper, scissors* in the yard, the enthusiasm of their shouts and laughter reverberating against two houses and in the near distance, an all-pervading row of palm trees that jut out into an impossibly blue sky. Sunlight and leisure, the crisp noise and color that evoke the sanctity of domesticated youth and its protections, suggestive of a place that could double for the South Pacific Islands or Long Beach, and momentarily suspended from the menacing metronome of cops always on the beat. Their young voices echo then fade to black with the hyperblue graffitied writing of the film's title playing against the beatboxed music, an auidial dynamism that is undercut by its direct fadeout and juxtaposition into the grim, industrial interior of the state penitentiary where we meet one incarcerated Son of Samoa, Limu as he waits behind bars, his tattooed body bearing witness to the "miseducation" of his pasts, presents, and futures while being instructed by Sargeant Kaono, on how he should properly present himself to the judge to ensure the best possible

outcome in his sentencing hearing. We can already glean the glaring contradictions of youthful dreams and American nightmares undercut by rage and by race, of women and men failed by systems of schools, streets, and prison industrial complexes that either overdetermine through gross appropriation or waste through shameless neglect, those slender blades of possibilities for the expansion of a life force constricted by the ignominious demands of racial capitalism.

In what is the film's most provocative sequence, Gorin troubles his own directorial authority through an invitation of the camera's range of movement and content to the Sons of Samoa themselves. Are they staging themselves or are they being staged to stage? Riffing on Trinh T. Minh-Ha, who is the framer, and who is the framer framed? In the garage, different members stare back into the camera and assume the position of historical materialists, Raymond Williams by way of the West Side, by defining keywords that are importance to their survival and existence (OG, golddigger, Wolfticket, Strap, Tat, Sissy, et al). After this initial set of responses marked by profane jocularly and machismo, they undergo a line of questioning delivered and re-directed by the same OG homie who schooled us from American Samoa before. They're called upon to reflect on their experiences in street warfare, love, violence, passion, their kin, their homies, their ideas of work, and their hopes for an/other life; they are in essence asked how they would like to see themselves represented through the visual frame, a question to which they are usually held distant in favor of an entire genre of media and reportage that

simultaneously glorifies, demonizes, and spectacularizes a pathological urban (read: racialized) masculinity.

In this garage, we see the precarious balance of life and time always underwritten by the menace of death: a 15-year-old who wants so desperately to prove himself to his older homies, to “do good work” for them, while an older one, “Joker,” recounts the chilling instant he was literally stabbed in the gut by reality. These different narrative accumulations of value and work carry a critical illegibility to the dominant and dominating controls of capitalism from which these members are blunted from the abstraction of full participation but also one that powerfully evokes the other exchanges and passages of those with little power who still try to make some anyway, always happening, under the nose of the state’s surveilling mechanisms.

#### IV.

My attention to this final documentary as it is situated at one end of Gorin’s filmography, now twenty years removed seems just as forceful, providing an apt visual poetry and music that still speaks to everyday life in present-day capitalism. Indeed, this beat that is called *late* capitalism, the “innovation” that is neoliberalism, is of course an economic theory that bleeds beyond the realm of the market into the governance of our social, cultural, and political lives. In this chain of signification, the freedom that is ascribed to the *free* market works in concert with the production of the free individual and the free world, one that is invested in disciplining everything from the soul to education to policy where the colonizing tricks of privatization, deregulation,

and extreme individualism reign supreme. Neoliberalism's contribution to the signaled lateness of capitalism is a deepening of the space/time divisions of the world through the discourse of technology and development, rearticulating the historical and structural logics of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and liberal humanism. Indeed, if time is money, and if capitalism is late, one can argue that value and time have always already been out of joint for bodies, communities, nations, and other territories that cannot cohere under the rubric of nationalism. They are the ones either pushed backward or forward but never present for the liberatory purchase of freedom.

And so here, in concluding, I turn to the mystery that marks the title of this paper: for again our Sargeant Kaono, or Jerry, frequently does night patrol and his HAL computer ironically monotone asides and soliloquies form a kind of Greek chorus to the action around it. At one point, the computer asks: "These gangsters, Jerry. Do they hold as much mystery for you as they do for me?" This reflexive question, playful and problematic, elusive and loaded like Roland Barthes' finger on the trigger of the photographic apparatus, lingers on as an indirect critique of the knowledge the forms both the basis and the evasion of the film's subjects. The mystery is neither the sociological fictions of race and masculinity that so comically coalesce in the form of Jets vs. Sharks in *West Side Story* nor is it the card cataloged indexing that seek to find the authenticity and essence of Samoan culture.

No, the mystery that circles and confounds this tongue in cheek technological device and its well-intentioned Hawaiian cop who is forever

after “one more Samoan kid [he] could not save” is the mystery of the unpredictable potential for another social order to be generated, one whose radical reorganization depends upon the divide of not the international datelines on humanity but of a more democratic aesthetic and political practice that might and perhaps given democracy’s multiple intimidations and cruelties should abscond from what we conceive of as democracy itself, enabling these youth to utilize their hardened streetwise ingenuity into a genius of a more transformative import and imagination.



Figure 3.3: A quiet, shared moment in *My Crazy Life* (1992)

I am therefore thinking about the musical and poetic drives that condition the film’s visual framings of these germinal images, the keen and cutting phrases that form an alternative relationality between the director and the Sons of Samoa, the Sons of Samoa to themselves, through their concerted

acts and critical tactics of representation. For as much as the gang's territorial claims to their hood and their streets is undercut by the continuous disenchantments of material and physical dispossession, their stealing into other musical and even spiritual formations of subjecthood in this film can attest to the determined creativity that must be culled in this task that is raced and gendered immigrant survival against the ongoing warfare that is American society. I am thinking of the pursuit of a vision more in tune with a universal consciousness that is not about an empirically driven universalism but one that rests on a commitment to a kinesthetics and an aesthetics of kinship, a movement towards a more just and humane present whose future should not and never be surrendered. This future wavers in the still of one last lingering moment on a hot afternoon in American Samoa, where our OG member who has finally "come home" rests at the feet of his grandmother who lovingly touches his head, one quiet seat and story in the everyday of empire held for an extended duration so that we, too, may have a chance to contemplate and reach for that other world, too.

### Chapter 3:

#### **“REVOLUTION?”:**

#### **On Jy-Ah Min’s *M/F Remix* and The Aesthetics of the Remix**

Whatever you now find weird, ugly, uncomfortable and nasty about a new medium will surely become its signature. CD distortion, the jitteriness of digital video, the crap sound of 8-bit - all of these will be cherished and emulated as soon as they can be avoided. It’s the sound of failure: so much modern art is the sound of things going out of control, of a medium pushing to its limits and breaking apart. The distorted guitar sound is the sound of something too loud for the medium supposed to carry it. The blues singer with the cracked voice is the sound of an emotional cry too powerful for the throat that releases it. The excitement of grainy film, of bleached-out black and white, is the excitement of witnessing events too momentous for the medium assigned to record them.

-Brian Eno, *A Year of Swollen Appendices* (1995)

#### I.

#### *Theorizing Modern Failure*

If this chapter is situated at the interface of digital filmmaking and present-day geopolitics, I begin with this provocative, if even paradoxical passage taken from the published diary account of English musician and visual artist, Brian Eno, as its dispersive style and ideas dovetails into my discussion of the film, *M/F Remix*, in the next section.<sup>78</sup> What endears itself from this aphoristic stream of consciousness is the centrality of form in contemporary aesthetics and politics, in so much that form is a technology (and technology is a form) that holds the imaginative potential and

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<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, the circulation of this passage online – usually reblogged in each appearance tens of thousands of times – proves the point of my chapter -- always attributed to its author but never with much knowledge of the source. It functions as an aphorism, a loose philosophy for how to approach one’s practice as an artist, writer, musician.

production for representation's emergence. "Distortion," "jitteriness," and "crap sound" – generally perceived as the temporary roadblocks to cultural and technological advancement – are taken here as being the synecdoche to the modern "sound of failure." Failure, subsequently, shows the instability of modern art alongside modernity, with their forms, multiple and mutable, being pushed to their absolute limits, their borders broken open, transgressed, and *decomposed*, resulting in a loss of control and internal collapse. Failure is the trial and error of *play* and *experimentation*, recreation as re-creation (for in French, playtime translates, fittingly, to the Jacques Tati cinematic plasticity of *récréation*), a *de*-formation of proficiency and perfection that order the world of things and its expectation of all variables to be "on time" and "in their rightful place." These underlying irregularities that can be minor annoyances or major crises are the requisite loopholes that burst open the conditional fantasies of the "finished product." They can generate unanticipated sensory experiences of image and sound that in turn can experiment with other ways of seeing, listening, and engaging to and with the world. In programming and production, these failures can strike at any moment in spite of (or to spite) our best intents and preparations. Unpredictable and usually unwanted, failure's abstraction suddenly materializes to suspend the flow of space, time, and work, as a technical disturbance whose discord conveys to the creator/user/viewer/listener a dispatch of some gap or omission that has occurred in the infrastructure of a machine, a channel, or a voice and a practical redirection of our knowledge to a problem that was heretofore marginalized or not visible. Failure's materiality enacts a critical probe into the



social dimensions that exist beyond the theoretical stasis of formal design to ponder if in its continued application, the form buckling under pressure should be maintained, adjusted, or disassembled altogether for rebuilding on a sounder, more just, and equitable foundation.

Interestingly, Eno traffics back and forth between the spheres of technology and performance, objects and bodies, without reservations, indicating the accelerated messiness (or messy accelerations) of modernity's technologically mediated existence, specially with the growing interactions and interdependencies with an array of "dumb," "smart," perhaps even "mad" machines, gadgets, devices, platforms, and screens. This situation also gives way to a portrait of modernity that disputes its outright positivism, one that is shadowed with a whole new host of political and ethical conundrums. One sinister example would be: how do we grapple with the jarring outcomes of technology as it is deeply imbricated with the inflammation of the military industrial complex, the protracted fight against global terrorism, and the American empire? A mobile phone transmitting through any number of cellular networks enables an American to acquire GPS to get to her or his next destination, stream digital content, and stay in touch with someone halfway around the globe but is also used by the National Security Agency (NSA) to collect caller data in bulk for "target development" in the name of national defense since September 11, 2001.<sup>79</sup> A mobile phone's "freedom" is also its own "unfreedom" when used in service of an American state of surveillance,

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<sup>79</sup> See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/apps/g/page/world/how-the-nsa-is-tracking-people-right-now/634/>

control, and incarceration. If technology has historically and structurally been the manipulation of “the processes and materials of nature... to satisfy human need [and] whim,” we can see writ large that its inventions of conveniences and efficiency are never neutral. The creation of these comforts belies the blowbacks of technology’s significance to the destructive machinations behind national, colonial, and imperial might and benevolence that span the Second World War to the Cold War to the War on Terror.<sup>80</sup> Taken in sum, they offer a paltry set of names/events that mark a century of ceaseless worldwide war. One wonders: are ecological and human exploitation and ruin when coupled with the cognitive structures of amnesia, atrophy, and passivity that technology can bring actually worth it?

Now, it would be too easy to say that technology is merely another repressive state apparatus, as it also displays and object-ifies the convolution of our affective and ideological tensions with modernity’s store of aspirations, ambivalences, anxieties, and alienations. It is no coincidence that Eno’s allusive leaps from the “distorted guitar sound” to “the blues singer with the cracked voice” to the “grainy film... witnessing events too momentous for the medium to record them,” incite such diverse, overlapping, and color-conscious feelings of pleasure, pain, paranoia, *and* possibility in what technology has to offer, especially for those who suffer the most social, economic, and political dispossession. Without distinguishing specific persons

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<sup>80</sup> Raymond Murphy. “Ecological Materialism and the Sociology of Max Weber.” Sociological Theory and the Environment: Classical Foundations, Contemporary Insights. Eds. Riley E. Dunlap, Frederick H. Buttel, Peter Dickens, and August Gijswijt (Lanham: Rowland and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 82.

or places, these riffs conjure up trans-historical visions of culture and technology joined to create dissenting chords: Jimi Hendrix's cutting-edge use of amplifier feedback to mimic the noise of bombs and rockets in his version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" in the midst of U.S. militarized aggression in Vietnam during the Cold War; or Billie Holiday's battered voice clinging to the insurgent lyricism of "Strange Fruit" that condemns extralegal violence and terrorism against Black people in U.S. society post-Reconstruction; or the proliferation of consumer camcorders and other portable audio-visual recording devices that are used to document instants of everyday violence and resistance that, in other points of time, would have gone un(der)reported.

If the spectrality of failure is the structural double for *success'* desired stability and accumulation, success is a discourse that is broadly associated with the solipsistic, expansionist, and unregulated competitive drives and logics that are endemic to modernity's current face/phase: neoliberalism. What was once called *colonialism* is reduced to its World Bank/International Monetary Fund/NGO approved euphemism, *development*, so that domination is merely a "successful" or "failed" development project. Rupturing the Manichean binary of success versus failure as well as the definitive cohesion of their discrete terminologies opens up a potent site for harvesting strong critiques against the "enlightened" development that typifies the upsurge of neoliberalism's scourge across the continents since the 1970s. Following the scholarship of David Harvey and Wendy Brown, neoliberalism can be characterized as the dominant and promiscuous economic ideology that has penetrated most every facet of social, cultural, and political life as we know it,

where the boundlessness and freedom of the individual, market, and world are joined together and sanctified; where the deterministic motivations of capitalism and profit undermine the workings of democracy and justice; and where “persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm [thus] both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value.”<sup>81</sup> If not a firm, Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas ignites this discursive Molotov Cocktail from the general vicinity of the Global South: “what the Right offers [with neoliberalism] is to turn the world into one big mall where they can buy Indians here, women there...”<sup>82</sup> In these theorizations, the economy is no longer simply a financial metaphor. Finance is now the absolute model through which individuals and institutions are expected to operate, function, perform, and conform. Furthermore, one cannot simply worry about the pecuniary disposition of *value* in the present as neoliberalism attempts to colonize and assimilate even the space and time of the future through the speculative domain of “future value.” Structure is re-mystified; value’s fulfillment, a Sisyphean undertaking. And it is the individual who bears the sole liability and contusion for her or his gains and deficits.

In this framework, failure in the past leads to a regressive future nostalgia, the “signature” features of once malfunctioning new mediums

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<sup>81</sup> My definition is informed both by David Harvey’s [A Brief History of Neoliberalism](#) and especially Wendy Brown’s [Undoing the Demos](#) where she considers how neoliberal capitalism’s logic is antithetical to democratic governance.

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.globalexchange.org/resources/econ101/neoliberalismdefined>

simply incorporated into a repressive developmental logic. To be “cherished and emulated” under neoliberalism is to be remade and rebranded so that the original is now static and homogeneous. This is failure as commodity fetish, with its operating systems and/or social conditions expunged and its symptoms reduced to an essentialized set of properties to be reiterated for readymade consumption. Values that are considered to be ill-suited and thus unlikely for “use” to the current demands of the market are rendered obsolete. This is failure without history, innovation stuck in an endless feedback loop of novelty, as an *a priori* phenomenon that can be naturalized into a timeless narrative of modernity’s *bildungsroman* – from raw materials to merchandise, poverty to wealth, inequality to equality.<sup>83</sup>

In this move, history is simply a pile of junk and a pile of plastic. Even our failures *and* successes of the past – from the momentous to the minute, from social movements to children’s toys – are not safe, preyed upon with a vengeance by the industries of state and culture. While memory, as a cognitive procedure of informational storage and retrieval, is forever “a partial construct different from its source,” they can be underwritten by the conservative commerce of the present (read: what does not interrupt the status quo of “business as usual”) that foreclose, in repetition, the prospects for other pasts and other futures to exist, pasts and futures that can contest the conquest of those that hegemonic power fails to account for. Repetition to the point of redundancy spans film, television, music, video games, clothing, and social

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<sup>83</sup> <http://www.manifestoproject.it/bruce-mau/>

media – everything from Throwback Thursday jams on corporate controlled radio to endless reboots of Hollywood movie franchises like *Jurassic Park*, *Terminator*, and *Transformers* – that teach and reteach us how to remember the past. While these correspondents are obviously prosaic and ostensibly harmless, repetition reaches beyond cottage industries of nostalgia that comprise shoeboxes of baseball cards or dusty collector's plates. Repetition, as a practice and an ideology, provides a glimpse into the totalizing static of *who ultimately controls the media* and the formulas they effect to preserve their power through segmented and decontextualized revisions of history.

Surveillance or *sous-veillance*? To document or be documented from above or below? For my own purposes, I want to focus on how these sounds *and* images of failure – the *difference* that inevitably emerges in the repetitive schemes, the 1 / 10 that does not hear the interpellative hail – can compose a malcontent archive of modernity whose “innovation” constellates the complex creative capacity of individuals to ethically and collectively respond to the traumatic traces of a world in the constant throes of war and upheaval, gendered racism and revolutionary change. Neoliberalism fails us everyday. These sounds and images that are produced and reproduced are not so much the ghosts in the machine as they are the undead passions of a *liveliness* too unruly to be contained “by the medium[s] supposed to carry [them].” As a result, these passions are usually met with active suppression, trivialization, or erasure by state power from the dominant record of sanctioned knowledge in order to lengthen the continuity of the norm. However, such attempts to disappear these disturbances are temporary and conditional. Manifest

oppression is always met with the innumerable means and modes of manifest opposition that range from the covert to the spectacular. While Eno's writing precedes 1999's World Trade Organization (WTO) antiglobalization protests that ensued with the "Battle of Seattle" or 2011's flowering of dissent against Wall Street style-capitalism with "Occupy," his prescient observation of the "excitement" of witnessing, recording, and participating in the "momentous" could very well be used in this context where thousands in recent history take to the streets against neoliberal growth and expansion. These popular, on the ground *histories* that invoke Walter Benjamin's messianic "tradition of the oppressed" proves a menace to the monolithic, top-down *History* that attempts to consolidate the old-as-new social order constituted by the selective political and financial interests of each historical period's ruling classes.

However, a subversive reading also brings up the obvious point that failure in its nature is not *consciously* produced to buttress state enterprise and neoliberal capitalist rationale. While failure can be mechanically and aesthetically reproduced, the exact conditions of space and time under which it finds its originary eruptions cannot be replicated with an unqualified fidelity. That desire for control and replication is a misguided attempt to regulate the creative wilding (that exceeds space, time, and body) that is necessary for innovation to happen, to insert failure as another variable within a linear developmental narrative of technology even as much as its very presence contains an internal disruption of that very progressive logic. The other point Eno makes is concerning the *distance* between what is idealized and what is realized, as a mediation of the material and physical conditions

from which cultural bodies, objects, and ideologies surface. Too, this distance also provides an ideological portrait of our attitudes, beliefs, and values in technology that is supposed to be free of such mischief. This understanding of technology as a site that negotiates modernity's self-image of infinite perfectibility, the ability to trust in the solidity of a straight line and to trust that it will move from point A to point B seamlessly, is suddenly upended by the apprehension that the line has ideas of its own. Perfectibility, thus, gives way to a maddening or exciting complexity. These failures, as the slips, skips, skids, snafus, what have you, in what we hear and what we see provides a different way of thinking about but more importantly rehearsing different relations to and arrangements of the social and political world.

If failure is what stalks and stalls the infrastructure of modernity's forms, modernity, as a whole, registers in this narrative as a complex form of failure. As much as modernity rejects failure, failure is what enables modernity to stay "modern" through its destruction of old forms to usher in the new, leaving it open to both proponents of conservation and change. This space of indeterminacy, joyous as it is frustrating (is what is new better than what is old? do the means to get there justify the ends? what are the means, and is there an end?) lends itself to exploration through cultural production.

## II.

### *Remixing M/F Remix*

San Diego, California, 2004. Two roommates in a time of war. In the midst of Bush's re-election, Youtube does not yet exist and people are beginning to link themselves on Facebook. The iPhone is just



around the corner and more and more folks are awakening to the reality of "iPod therefore I am." What are the grandchildren of 'The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola' up to? Not a remake of *Masculin Féminin* but a remix of it.

-*M/F Remix*, official film description

*Listening* to the first 1'30" of *M/F Remix* (2010), the feature film debut of Southern California-based, Korean American filmmaker, Jy-Ah Min, provides, consciously or not, a sonic compression of the musical, aesthetic, and political drives that compose the next 78 minutes of her and our search. We hear: a brief moment of silence followed by the unhurried and inquisitive overture of synth music (taken from "FON" by the Tijuana-based electronica project, Latinsizer, whose tracks go onto score several of the scenes). We hear: the start of a letter that begins with the address, "Dear Mr. Godard," spoken by two voices in counterpoint, one male, one female, speaking together in imperfect echo at some points and then speaking apart. We hear: discernable pauses in their lines punctuated with a drum machine, those lines being, "40 years later. We know Coca-Cola, but who the hell is Marx?" We finally hear: the female voice's delivery of "Marx" echoing out several times before "Marx" is overtaken by the accelerated tempo and volume of drum machine beats before they, too, are cut back into silence.

When one listens *through the eyes*, this 1'30" is three, black and white establishing shots (two interiors and one exterior) whose very flatness and familiarity to my perception is held in distance by the slightly unsteady stillness of a digital video camcorder. The first two are medium eye-level shots of a living room inside a suburban apartment, as the containment of the *here*, a

boring, insular, and taken for granted zone of American life and living. There are no people in the shot. Reproductions of two glossy and nonspecific magazine advertisements are arranged in vertical lines down the length of the wall, each featuring a female model whose face and body are framed in ways that emphasize her closeness to the sexual desires and appetites of the phallogocentric gaze. In the center is a "Free Winona" poster that hangs over an already outdated entertainment system with an upside down Marlboro cigarette carton sitting on top of the television set. This poster functions as a silent Greek Chorus by way of a postmodern Theatre of the Absurd, staring over the proceedings of the film with its mute, vacant, and vaguely problematic facsimile of a visage, gathering and dispelling qualities that range from the frivolous to the existential, as a litmus test for the political, cultural, and sociological inclinations of the characters and the viewers. The fact of its unblinking blankness only invites the diversion of (over)thinking: is "Free Winona" a gross appropriation and disdain of past and present struggles to emancipate political prisoners (i.e. *Free Angela, Free Huey, Free Leonard, Free Mumia*)? An excess of white female celebrity, a pop culture hangover of Winona Ryder's iconicity in a 1990s "Generation X" *Reality Bites* vacuum, or simply, an aesthetic that was placed there simply because "it looks cool"?



Figure 4.1: The anonymous soldier.

Before there is time to answer, Min cuts to the third, a medium high-angle shot of a rugged dirt terrain, as the exposure of the nerves of the *elsewhere*, a stark suggestion of a world in turmoil that lies at the margins or just outside the frame. The shot is deceptively straightforward while held in extended duration. An American soldier's body, recumbent, supine, and presumably killed in action, cuts the frame half. While the frame is horizontal, the body is positioned at a canted angle that induces dis-ease and tension with its extinguished corporeality, with the left arm stretched out, the other held close close, and the lifeless face turned outwards as if to implicate the viewer in its death. The anonymous body and the unmarked geography on which it rests form an *othered* narrative of the U.S. invasion of Iraq on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003

to fight “the good fight,” the War on Terror, the war against “us.” While this shot is a simulation of real death, the body forces us to confront this image among the many others that illustrate the horrors and casualties of modern warfare both hypervisible and invisible in American society, where the “boomerang” effect of a war that has no end, that seemingly will not and will never end, is the dehumanization of not only those who kill and are killed but also those who wait and watch from the sidelines. As Susan Sontag meditates:

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more - and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize.<sup>84</sup>

How do these images fail to represent, and how do we also fail these images as we inhabit the bordered estrangements of living/on?

This shot, as it turns out, will be our last hard look at the soldier. The difficulty of discerning race or gender or sex locates them as being both yet neither, in the dislocation of the slash that separates the *M* and *F* of the film’s title, a place where all categories falter, where representation fails, and where the will to know is incommensurable. The soldier is also symbolic of the strain of acquiring accurate and finite “data” since the war that is not a war’s beginning (at least a beginning from the American purview). The predominant way that the American public accesses, accumulates, archives, and disseminates information is no longer card catalogs but the internet. Seemingly everything has gone digital and wireless, verified or not, for better

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<sup>84</sup> Susan Sontag. On Photography (New York: Penguin, 1977), 12.

and for worse. A casual search will yield that U.S. military casualties for the years 2003 and 2004 were, depending on the source, 486 and 849 or 580 and 906.<sup>85</sup> Disaggregating this data would also show that these dead are vastly overrepresented by young, working class men and women of color. This number is displayed, then quickly concealed, by the photographs of American flag-draped coffins returning from Iraq. These photographs were published in major American news outlets then subjected to criticism for damaging the American efforts to eradicate global “terror.” Much of what we do know about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq is not from the passive surveillance of the U.S. Department of Defense but from hacking groups like Wikileaks. On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, Wikileaks released the Iraq War Logs which constituted the “largest classified military leak in history” where they immediately made available the 391,832 reports that “document the war and occupation in Iraq, from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2004 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2009.” At that time, they reported 109,032 deaths in Iraq, of which 66,000 (or 60%) were civilians.<sup>86</sup> The documented civilian deaths from violence, as of this writing, are estimated to be between 151-177-170,634 with total violent deaths including

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<sup>85</sup> I typed in various search terms like “American soldier deaths 2004 Iraq,” “American soldier casualties 2004,” “Iraq casualties 2004,” to see if I could casually retrieve a number, specifically for these two years. These two example figures, then, are from the following sites: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/263798/american-soldiers-killed-in-iraq/> and <http://icasualties.org/IRAQ/index.aspx>. The official Wikipedia page ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties\\_of\\_the\\_Iraq\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Iraq_War)) references for a number of its statistics a document at address, <http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf>, from the U.S. Department of Defense, however that document produces a 404 – Page not found. The DoD’s official document, <http://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>, represents the total but does not disaggregate by year.

<sup>86</sup> <https://wikileaks.org/irq/>

combatants numbering 242,000.<sup>87</sup> The record of civilian deaths is further compounded by the revelation of U.S. military abuses and torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba where photographs and testimonials of sexual, psychological, and corporeal torture ripped open the seams of war, exposed its brutality, its ugliness, and its sadism, but failed to end it. Against *this* number, American soldiers fallen pale in comparison.

If “shock and awe” is an affective pseudonym for the military doctrine “based on achieving rapid dominance over an adversary by the initial imposition of overwhelming force and firepower” instituted by the U.S. with “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” then one wonders about the aftermaths of such violence and freedom that outlast and outlive the official ends and deaths.<sup>88</sup> What are the *debts* of those deaths? The documented numbers cannot and will never register the magnitude of pain, suffering, and trauma of those who suffer the physical and psychological injuries, deformities, diseases, and disorders that are the “indirect” impacts of militarized destabilization. The voices implore over this shot and the body, “We know Coca-Cola, but who the hell is Marx?,” with Marx echoing several times into fade-out. While the soldier will register to the audience, they may wonder about the obliqueness of this reference. The question is Min’s riff on an intertitle from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Masculin Féminin* (1966), which reads, “This film could be called The

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<sup>87</sup> The Iraq Body Count “maintains the world’s largest public database of violent civilian deaths since the 2003 invasion, as well as separate running total which includes combatants. IBC’s data is drawn from cross-checked media reports, hospital, morgue, NGO and official figures or records.” <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100502693>

Children of Marx and Coca-Cola.” Min’s use of this unlikely, unholy union of Marx and Coca-Cola in Godard’s statement is her hypothesis and her provocation. If Godard was speaking from the fractured Cold War politics of communism pitted against capitalism, where the alternative that communism posed in contradistinction to capitalism was matched only by the fear it aroused in the Western hegemonic bloc – is Coca-Cola and/or Marx even relevant anymore? Or has it gone the way of the card catalog, its contents to be stamped “Discard” into the trash heap of history?



Figure 4.2: The Grandchildren of Marx and Coca-Cola?

Now, the official description for the film asserts that it is “not a remake of *Masculin Féminin* but a remix of it.” Cinephiles will no doubt recognize what *Masculin Féminin* (1966) is and where it fits within the cinematic oeuvre of its famed French filmmaker, Jean-Luc Godard. For casual viewers, however,

the origin of Min's remix may strike them as being enigmatic, esoteric, or even "intellectually obnoxious."<sup>88</sup> However, Min's intention with remixing Godard is to sample from an original source to build a work authentic to the vision of the one who creates, with canny cues and clues to meditate on the question – "what is revolution?" – as well as the ambiguity and quizzicality of what the question itself means today. Min's film, however, does not focus on a group of militant activists in the vein of Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967) where he paints a darkly comic portrait of middle class university students who, bored with their suburban lifestyles, form a Maoist cell in a bourgeois apartment and plot a political assassination to incite revolution. Min runs in the other direction, where two people who embody the *Masculin* and the *Féminin* in her remix are twentysomething Asian Americans who have probably never even heard of Mao's *Red Book* and are dispassionate or mostly unresponsive towards the domain of politics. Their names are Philip and Mimi, and they are played by unknowns, Philip Westerland and Mimi Goh, who also happened to be Min's roommates. Min follows them through an installation of isolated episodes, alternately mundane, humorous, serious, surreal, artful, and fanciful, that discharge chains of image, text, and sound to tell "a story of youth/ with no story at all." Focusing inward to the everyday and quotidian, Philip and Mimi devote the bulk of their time and energy to the individual concerns of early adulthood (i.e. finding a job, a relationship, an identity, a purpose) while seemingly disconnected from what is going on around them.

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<sup>88</sup> <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/S-F-International-Asian-American-Film-Fest-caps-2471913.php>



What is going on around them, in short, is the 2004 presidential re-election of George W. Bush (whose first victory in 2000 was heavily contested as fraudulent), the escalation of U.S. imperial power and military violence in the Middle East, and the rising death toll on all sides.

The film's origins can be traced back to when Min was an undergraduate student in Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego in 2003. Upon her first viewing of *Masculin Féminin* (on a wrong region code DVD without English subtitles, no less), she was still compelled enough by what she saw to plan an experiment of what the earlier film would look like when transferred from the youth of Paris on the verge of the May 1968 rebellion to the youth of San Diego in the midst of the War on Terror in 2004. Enlisting the help of French American director and professor, Jean-Pierre Gorin, what was supposed to be just a summer project grew into a half-decade long endeavor and obsession. Some differences abound between *Masculin Féminin* and *M/F Remix*. For one, Godard was already in his mid-thirties and a well-established name whose films like *À bout de souffle* (1959) and *Bande à parte* (1964) helped to propel if not the movement then the idea of a French New Wave cinema to international audiences. By the time he made *Masculin Féminin*, his "tricks" of employing jump-cuts, intertitles, direct address to the audience, and aggressive non-linear editing to tell stories without telling stories were in full effect. With *MF*, it was to have youth engage in circular questionings of love, sex, war, and politics. But he was also becoming disillusioned with his place within cinema as a tradition and as an establishment, especially the propagation of bourgeois codes of representation

and capitalist modes of production and their entanglements with the repressive state apparatus of France and the rising American militarism in Southeast Asia. These apprehensions would find their most radical demonstration in his co-founding, with Gorin (*M/F*'s producer), of the film collective, the Dziga Vertov Group (1968-1972). *Masculin Féminin*, in its structures of feeling and form, represents a midway point between these two junctures, containing Godard's "dominant, residual, and emergent" concerns about cinema that plays like an audio-visual mixtape of 1960s Parisian society. In an interview from the period, he responds that his film is "on the idea of youth. A philosophical idea, but not a practical one – a way of reacting to things... Let's say that it speaks of youth, but it's a piece of music, a 'concerto youth.'"<sup>90</sup> Godard states that he *speaks of* but could not *speak for* or *about* youth from his own position, as he no longer possessed the immediacy to the situation of youth in 1966 and was on "the outside looking in."

Min's *approach*, on the other hand, is from "the inside looking out," as, age, class, and race-wise, she has an *immediacy* to the subjects she is documenting and also a command of the technology and cultural signs (hip hop, internet, computers, social media, et al) that are available to her and her peers to create a history of the present. Shooting in black and white (with color's injection being used as a break, accent, or interruption in certain moments), Min uses the titular remix as a means to pursue the opposite of *immediacy*, or as she texts to us (as if already expecting its explosion as a means

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<sup>90</sup> [http://www.rialtopictures.com/FTP/ZIP\\_masculine/GodardonMF.pdf](http://www.rialtopictures.com/FTP/ZIP_masculine/GodardonMF.pdf)

of direct communication), “the name of the game/ begins with a D – *Distance*.” Her objective is to use distance to observe, to examine and cross-examine what she has consumed as commonsense. She uses Godard’s aesthetics and formal structure of tableaux vivants (or “living pictures”) to dis-integrate, collate, and recombine the present she sees and hears before her. To *remix*, then, means that Min takes the generalizations that make up her lived experience like *San Diego, 2004, suburbia, isolation, the internet, two roommates*, and *War on Terror* and gives them a specific texture through complex editing strategies inspired not only by Godardian cinema but also “complex musical compositions of artists like Missy Elliot, DJ Shadow, Radiohead and the Nortec Collective.”<sup>91</sup> To *remix* the present is also to have the creative fearlessness to have her:

digital image... be unapologetic and not [try] to be something that it’s not. It was lit differently and its weaknesses had to be used as a quality of its aesthetic. This meant stretching and straining the fragility of its light schemes in B&W and experimenting until the image literally (digitally) fell apart...

Using the sequences of *Masculin Féminin* meant rethinking the concepts of ‘quoting’ and ‘paying homage’. Both terms imply that the borrowed segments somewhat retain its original context and meaning. But growing up listening to HipHop had me spinning in a different direction. The rule was to use quotations as a launch pad. I could take off from it, but I didn’t always have to land in the same place. That was the simple principle of this remix. In a remake, you try to preserve the main intentions of the original work. In a remix you can deconstruct the original work and just use an aspect of it to create an entirely different form and meaning.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> “Interview by Gabriel Bortzmeyer with director, Jy-Ah Min, Date: June 2010.” <http://mfremix.com/>

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Remixing also enables her to breezily bypass out of the question of genre that obsesses film critics and scholars. In this way, it can be a maddening chameleon of a film. Tracing the festival settings in which it had its first run of screenings reveals the heterogeneity of its reception. *M/F* had its world premiere at the 21<sup>st</sup> Marseille Festival of Documentary Film in November 2010 and its U.S. premiere at the 29<sup>th</sup> San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival. Meanwhile, its listing on IMDB takes no chances and places it everywhere: “Documentary,” “Comedy,” and “Drama.”<sup>33</sup> For Min, Godard, documentary, 1968, everything is up for grabs.

To further meditate on why the *remix* as an aesthetic practice will be so crucial to the alchemy of my cinematic critique, I take a detour here and consider it briefly and dialogically with the widely circulated currency of what *M/F* negates, the *remake*. One fresh citation to this term as it corresponds to the globalized circuits of cultural production, distribution, and consumption is discussed at length by Bliss Cua Lim in her innovative study, *Translating Time: Cinema, The Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, that brings Henri Bergson’s philosophies of cinematic time to bear upon the corpus of postcolonial historiography.

With the renewed interest in the horror genre in the late 1990s, the Hollywood film industry turned its attention across the Pacific Rim and took possession of *Asian horror* as an emergent cottage industry and formula for success – with *Ringu* and *Ju-on* being two of its exemplars. Through ghostly

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1714678/>

translations, many of these remakes attempt to circumvent and sequester the materiality of national and ethnic difference from their largely East Asian sources in the reach for a “universalizing” time and subject or in concrete terms, market and reception. Paradoxically, these imports are then exported back towards an international audience, with varying degrees of fidelity and profit. “Genre is cannibalistic,” Lim suggests, a devouring of the original’s creative and cultural labors by a voracious Western market, an “intertextual repetition” that “ingests’ its precursors.<sup>94</sup> From these films, the haunted house remains, a recurring set piece so prominent to horror and the “*space [that] has a memory*” that spans and spooks the *longue durée* of modernity’s arc. It surfaces as a spatial metaphor for how the producers of these remakes subject these (visual) properties to a *repossession* and rebuild the same house except with different materials.<sup>95</sup>

As she suggests, however, this house, built again and anew on a different shore, cannot be fully exorcized of its pasts even as it is repossessed. Its walls still murmur with the echoes of a previous temporality that willfully survives as a ghost in spite of the dominating logics of deracination and erasure. For me, the *remix*, while also in perilous proximity to the exploitative entrapments of an insidiously “free market,” is the house with an inbuilt exteriority. It is not so much about the constrictive capitalist grids of property and ownership as it is taking materials and daring to build a different structure altogether, perhaps a recalcitrance by way of resistance, a freedom to

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<sup>94</sup> Bliss Cua Lim. Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 195.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 205.

dream, to speculate, and to ride the rhizomatic speeds, intensities, and frequencies that are productive of and producing an alternative relationality that takes the source beyond its own intentions. Cosmic reincarnations: time is out of joint but the remix moves with the counterbeats. These relations, I contend, have the potential to disturb the dominant arrangements of the hegemonic records of encounter and inheritance: a process that is at its onset inchoate and unenclosed, a state of becoming without predetermined correspondences and inciting the Deleuzean “lines of flight” that can divert and rearrange the means away from their fixed origins towards other arrangements and ends of imagination, with alternative philosophical dimensions, political struggles, and aesthetic strategies.

### III.

#### *Practicing Modern Distance*

“In a Time of War. Two Roommates.”

The jaunty, off-screen whistling of “The Star-Spangled Banner” is a cue for the introduction of text on-screen that reads “PHILIP” in white letters justified to the left. Another shot goes off: it is both an auidial cut to the next frame and is timed in-sync with the collision of a paper airplane that is thrown from off-screen at our first eponymous character. *Philip* stands against the wall with a blank expression wearing a t-shirt that reads “Pornstar.” The next frame shows our second eponymous character against the same wall, identified as “MIMI,” with again the sound of a gunshot as a paper plane hits her. Her expression is different from Philip in that she seems puzzled,

frustrated, or annoyed at whoever she is looking at. The third character is an extreme close-up taken from a low angle of an illustration of former President George W. Bush taken from a magazine cover. Police sirens can be heard going off over and under his dull expression before we cut to a street scene where a Vulcan cement mixing truck drives across the frame from left to right then right to left in front of the now defunct Café Noir in downtown San Diego. While this detail is quick to vanish, this tongue in cheek moment that Min is able to capture spontaneously is loaded with meaning as “Vulcan” is also the nickname given for “the original members of a group of eight who advised Bush on foreign and national security policy issues as he made his first run for the White House.”\* Min cuts back and forth between herself and Godard, Philip who sits at a table smoking and reading Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* in San Diego, 2004 and Jean-Pierre Léaud who sits at a table smoking and writing about not-writing in Paris, 1966, forming a visual “conversation.” Underscoring the action (or lack thereof), Min contemplates the associations of the “stolen gesture” in the form of a cigarette trick that Léaud executes and that Philip fails to despite several amusing attempts. If all gestures are iterations of other gestures, and if all gestures, in art, in life, in practice, are acts of theft, Min seems to wonder, what do we do once we gain the wakefulness to understand these troubled inheritances? How do we use

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\* This description is taken from Dov Zakheim’s article, “Confessions of a Vulcan,” where he provides “an insider’s story of how the Bush administration lost Afghanistan,” as published in *Foreign Policy* on May 13, 2011  
<http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/05/13/confessions-of-a-vulcan-2/>

the gesture to imagine the *otherwise* of the world and sometimes the *otherwise* of the gesture itself?

What is up for inquiry is not the cigarette trick, but the cigarette trick turned upside down in the Duchampian sense of toilet-as-fountain to be something other than what it is. I turn now to a key sequence which illustrates how Min mobilizes remixing to negotiate the imperative of the “stolen gesture,” Godard’s emphatic aesthetic tendencies with her own contemporary innovations. It is a complexly edited interchange of print media, filmed scenes, and audiovisual effects. Mimi and Philip are first shown haphazardly going through the classified ads of the newspaper looking for jobs. They skim through the various listings, but the effort is half-hearted at best. A close-up of the page reveals a mess of black marker and white out. This cuts to a series of gunshots for headlines that document the mounting violence and failure of the War in the Middle East: “Deadliest day for U.S.,” one headline reads, followed by two issues of *Time* magazine that feature George W. Bush and a white American soldier’s bellicose rehearsal of a combat face; a book review headline for *The Abu Ghraib Investigations* and *Torture and Truth* that reads “Atrocities in Plain Sight”; followed by the whistled snatch of a refrain of “America the Beautiful.” Over a local San Diego news broadcast of a bombing and a magazine headline that reads “We Were All Wrong,” Mimi’s voiceover thoughtfully states: “I don’t read the new.” This cuts to a *Time* cover dedicated to “Twixters... young adults who live off their parents, bounce from job to job and hop from mate to mate...” with toy soldiers that seem to guard the bemusement of its representative. Mimi quietly muses, “the news reads me.”



Min then cuts to Mimi and Philip “at play” somewhere in San Diego. They run around, chase each other, poke each other with sticks, while opposing headlines that read “We are all the torturers now” and “They just won’t grow up” flash on-screen.

If, as I noted, neoliberalism demands all elements to conform under the logics of the market, these two embody a failure not in their resistance but in their very lack of direction, discontent, and disconnect to the neoliberal imperative. It would be easy to assume that their passive stance to their surroundings is because they have already been programmed by neoliberalism to operate this way. However, the barrage of discourse that surrounds them and attempts to enfold them within its relentless on the hour fictions of generations, identities, and pathologies has left them little room to maneuver. Mimi adds, “Afghanistan. Iraq... Iraq. North Korea. Doesn’t reach me. I need a job.” This pairing of a failure to be reached and the anxiety of finding steady employment is itself one paradox of neoliberalism. Mimi’s aside, honest and existential, serves to illustrate how neoliberalism’s brand of rugged individualism has created its own modern complex of isolation, guilt, and disaffection. Why would she care about the Axis of Evil when she has grown up in a society that is seemingly history-less? What other way is there *to be* in a world that does not seem to care anyway, when everything has been made so easy and yet so remote? Throughout the filmed sequence, Min’s intervention is through the color bands that continue to flit and flicker on-screen. These color bands are incomplete and inchoate, imperceptible to Mimi and Philip and illegible to the viewer. Min’s use of this digital mistake as a

visual device hints at a another dimension to these images. This dimension is one that will finally emerge at the end of the film. This dimension is the dimension of history and the dimension of revolution.



Figure 4.2: "From time to time... the Ghosts of '68 came to visit Mimi and Philip."

In the penultimate scene, Min stages the cinematic equivalent of a *tempo rubato* – in music, the time that is stolen back or away in the playing of phrases at the discretion of a performer or conductor. She tunes into the noise that has been emitting from the "Ghosts of '68" ever since the last insistent echo of Mimi who asked "who the hell is Marx?" in the opening letter, and whose frequencies, till now, have only registered as the small, methodical glitches within and between the cuts. The rapid disagreement of *tick-tock-ticks* that sound off from numerous clocks on the soundtrack gestures towards the

artifice of *time* as it divides and stratifies space, labor, and people within its international datelines of progress and stagnation. Time is a construction and an imposition. The clocks also express the artfulness of time as reality itself is reconstituted through the un-reality of the filmmaking process, where fragments of filmstrip or digital video are subjectively sliced and sutured together to make visible its rendition, or *rephrases*, of the real. Thus, film is a kind of clock-making, and filmmakers, the artisans of time. Min malfunctions the clocks and “with this regard their currents turn awry,” no longer running on schedule.<sup>97</sup> In this third meaning, the clocks are anticipatory time, all the possibilities of what time can be once the material traces of histories that refuse to be repressed are released.

The craft of the clock and of film: Mimi is shown tinkering with a record player on the coffee table, as if she is unsure of how to make it play. At times, she places her ear over the record straining to hear something. Philip walks back and forth as he pastes more and more cut-out letters on the wall. The wall is now plastered with letters that make up words like “EVIL,” “HOUR,” “MONTH,” and “REVOLT.” Save for the series of *REVOLUTION*'s that line the upper perimeter, these other words are obscured by a giant target sign. One could gather that the target sign is a cunning double entendre for (1) the absolute clarity and didacticism that was required of manifestos, treatises, and tracts to provoke the masses to advance the historical and political process of liberation and (2) the absolute clarity and gratification that

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<sup>97</sup> Amanda Mabillard. “Hamlet Soliloquy Glossary.” Shakespeare Online. 20 Aug. 2000. <http://shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/soliloquies/regard.html>

consumer logos carry to promote instant public recognition for a company or product – in this case, the American retailer, Target. What is Mimi listening so intently for? Why does Philip continue to plaster slogans whose meanings feel so inaccessible for them and for the provisional “us”? The abrupt burst of “cuckoos” stall the ticking along with the digital color bands that disrupt the visual. Both underwrite the insertion of an intertitle that contains a quotation by Karl Krauss: “The more closely you look at a word the more distantly it looks back at you” with “Revolution” fired off beneath it. If 1968 was about the familiarity and self-evident nature of revolution, not only in Paris but in the entire world-system, then in 2004, “revolution” has become as distant and remote as looking up its definition inside a dictionary.

Schematically, the wall represents the logical and ideological paradoxes of capitalism. Whatever activism and revolution meant in 1968 has literally hit a wall in 2004. Revolution is a cipher, an aestheticized form that does not automatically signify through the weight of its word a radical reorganization of society. Rather, revolution is subsumed with the capitalist logic of commodity, and the face of revolutionaries who were so central to anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist movements in the 1950s and 1960s can be multiply, *infinitely* reproduced on a whole host of items for sale and exchange. Min picks up on this reversal of fortune with her first shot that contains text in the upper left quadrant that reads “From time to time...” that hangs suspended over a shot of Che as screen-printed on a t-shirt. If Che’s revolutionary politics is drained of its depth so that all that is left is surface, his t-shirt image only serves to underscore another death he has died through

the theatricality of power. Min's inclusion of Che in this crucial moment is a wry addendum to another (in)famous shot of Che as taken from a classic document of Argentinian Third Cinema, Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas' *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968). In it, they unleash an orchestration of visual and political fireworks to agitate the audiences to not only *watch* but to come into political consciousness through *witnessing*. Getino and Solanas conclude their first section on "Notes and Testimonials on Neocolonialism, Violence, and Liberation" in an act that disturbs one into the sanctity of silent contemplation. They hold a three-minute shot of the dead Che with his eyes wide open after his assassination by Bolivian soldiers trained by the American Green Berets and CIA operatives. The extended duration of that shot must ineludibly haunt every reproduction, such as this t-shirt, that is Che but not-Che. Where once he posed a viable threat to the Cold War politics of a colluding American and Latin American establishment, his image of revolution is defanged, as just "an object among other objects" through capitalist thingification.<sup>8</sup> Under these rules, Che is simply imprisoned to the emptiness of celebrity, an aesthetics of rebellion with no political spirit to speak of, flattened to the same level as a James Dean or the aforementioned Free Winona poster. To paraphrase Marx, singularity is tragedy and repetition, farce, and in this tale, Che Guevarra is the face of market kitsch.

In making their arrival, the *ghostliness* of the Ghosts of '68 is not that they are actually *ghosts*. *Ghosts* function as a metonymy encompassing the

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<sup>8</sup> Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

weird, anachronistic, and even comically absurd form that 1968 has taken from the point of view shared by Mimi and Philip. The ghosts signal an interruption from (but not entirely of) the three-dimensional constraints that trap them to their space (length, width, height) + time and unlock from the field of quantum potentiality the idea that has remained so elusive – *Revolution*. The joke is when these ghosts who are raised up with the shipwreck of *Revolution* traverse through the “wormhole” that melds past/present/future into one, 1968 with 2004, they literally walk through the door into Mimi and Philip’s apartment. And who are they? They are a just group of six elderly white men carrying differently shaped clocks as they dance around the room to jazz music then exit through the back. They are not the *actuality* of what once was (because that is an irresolvable desire) but rather a manifestation of the limited imagination that Mimi and Philip possess to conceive it. By taking this last turn for the surreal, Min’s mischievous use of irrational juxtapositions momentarily collapses the contradiction between the dream of national liberations and the reality of a world that has outwardly surrendered to the mass spectacles manufactured by state design and consumer capitalism. By making time go “out of joint” and by messing up the place where the hands (mechanical and human) on the clock should be, Min shows that even the most banal, mundane, and out of place elements of the everyday can hold the key to a betrayal that outmaneuvers the continued consolidation of hegemonic power held by states, governments, and empires. In this way, the boundaries of documentary, history, and temporality that are

already rendered elastic are taken down, its pieces remixed in suspense and belief as parts of a structure that has yet to be made.

If, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx once wrote, “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind,” here, the solidity and sanctity of living inside the secular religiosity that comprises American exceptionalism meets openness and disruption.<sup>9</sup> This change in states (cognition) is dependent upon the transference of energy (potential), demonstrating that everything is in essence impure and unstable. However, this very volatility also demonstrates that what is air and what is profane can go back to being as they were before. Will Mimi and Philip take this flash-image that leads another way and gain the sobriety of “sense” to assess the “real conditions of life”? Perhaps, the better question is if *that* history is even useful for them. Min seems to answer her own question when her own voice can be heard saying “Cut!” before a painterly shot of the San Diego city skyline after dark. The text reads, with a note of elegy: “...And when the ghosts had vanished... / it was if it never happened...”

#### IV.

##### *In Search of a Conclusion*

The trace of this film’s disposition appears in the trail of questions it leaves behind. I have taught this film on two separate occasions, both in the

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx. “Bourgeois and Proletarians.” *The Communist Manifesto*.  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>

context of Asian American media, and decided to enact a pedagogical experiment: one in which I provided extensive historical and cultural context, and one without. In both cases, however, the student audience reception was an uncanny mixture of distance, puzzlement, or apathy towards the aesthetic. The film makes one ponder, where are Asian Americans located in the thick of this geopolitical crisis? How could this film provide a critique into the stakes of Asian America today, and what is the role of Asian Americans as ethical witnesses and respondents to endless war? In her work in *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War*, Jodi Kim writes that the very conditions of possibility for a political coalition and identitarian category that is called *Asian America* to exist is through U.S. militarized violence and occupation in the Asia-Pacific, or what Dylan Rodriguez would term trans-Pacific articulations of Manifest Destiny. Philip and Mimi seem to float on the surface of these oceanic flows of historical violence and genocide. It is only in flashes that “Asia” even registers for them: a Chinese American phonebook or a passing reference to the city of Pusan in South Korea. However, these flashes offer “historical alternatives” of better, more just presents that can exist in the present. *Asian America*, while relegated to syndication as a target audience or cultural brand within neoliberal market logics, still bears in its naming the historical traces of war, genocide, colonialism, and liberation struggle that put pressure on its legibility as such.

One thing that is clear that the film believes there is a crisis. If Godard offered the alternative title of “The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola,” Min’s sarcastic reiteration of this conceit is, “Nothing New on the Western Front.”



The alternate alternative title *Min* had was a riff on a agitprop poster from May 1968 that cries, “Sais Jeune et Tais Toi” (“Be Young and Shut Up!”), with a youth whose mouth is muzzled by the shadowy figure of Charles DeGaulle. While in 1968, this invective came from the mouths of power, now it could very well come from the mouths of youths themselves. One wonders, however, are Mimi and Philip indeed the “Grandchildren of Marx and Coca-Cola,” connected to the unsettling genealogy of Godard’s youth? Or in spite of the way they have been framed, do they also have their own questions that must be pursued in a different kind of cinema?

One aesthetic strategy that *Min* offers us is *gleaning*. In a sequence where she pushes the aesthetic and artistic possibilities of the digital camcorder, she films a live-action recreation of Jean-François Millet’s 1857 painting, “The Gleaners.” Millet’s original painting depicts three peasant women who are engaged in the act of gleaning in the fields and as such, is notable for realizing the depiction of the lower classes and French agrarian life. *Min* by way of Millet, then, shows her actors who are dressed in the style of Millet’s figures, yet they are being staged in what appears to be a parking lot at night. They are lit not by moonlight but by a lamp that casts a circle of illumination around them. Two people hold a frame; the women assume their positions. The scene ends.

To glean means:

1. To gather [grain left by reapers.]
2. to take the leavings from a field.
3. to gather [facts, etc.] in small amounts or in places widely scattered

If gleaning is a tradition and act of accumulation that makes creative use of capitalism's surplus, Min's use of remixing, then, is like a digital gleaning. She takes discrepant and different parts that others may even think of as junk and connects them in ways that create alternative ways of seeing and being, living and creating. As much as the act of the remix itself, the process of searching for the materials is what is transformative. "Roads no longer lead to places," Mimi writes. "They are places."

The time for search is now.

Appendix:

**The Art and Act of Documentation:  
For My Mother**

what  
massacre  
happens to my son  
between  
him  
living within my skin  
drinking my cells  
my water  
my organs  
and  
his soft psyche turning cruel.  
does he not remember  
he  
is half woman.

-Nayyirah Waheed, "from"

I.

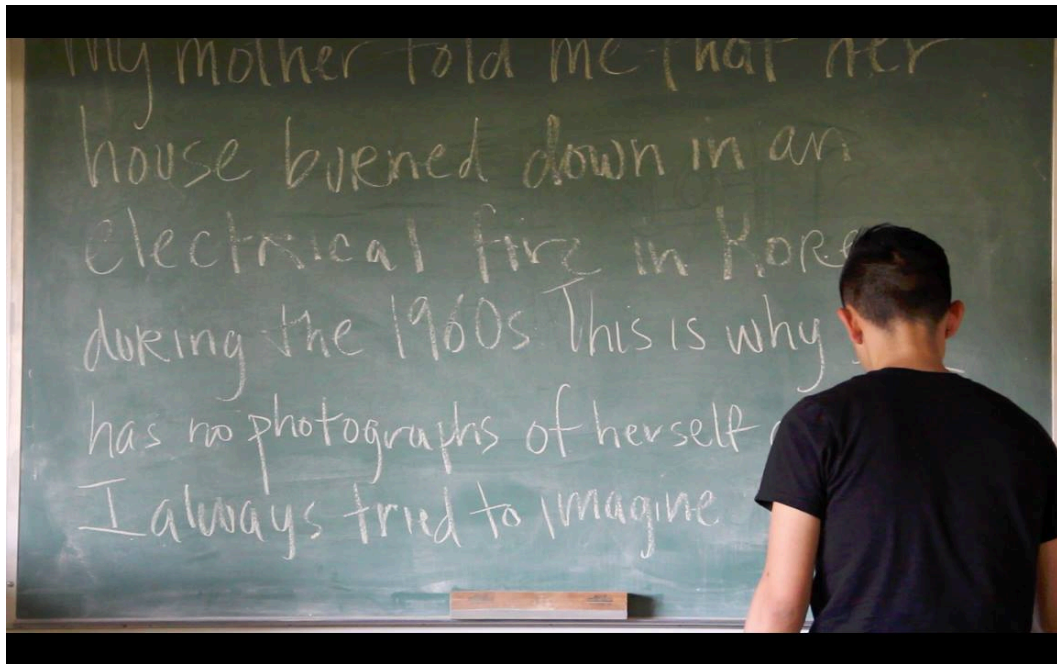


Figure 5.1: Chalkboard #1, *Water/Memory* (2014-present)



Figure 5.2: Chalkboard #2, *Water/Memory* (2014-present)

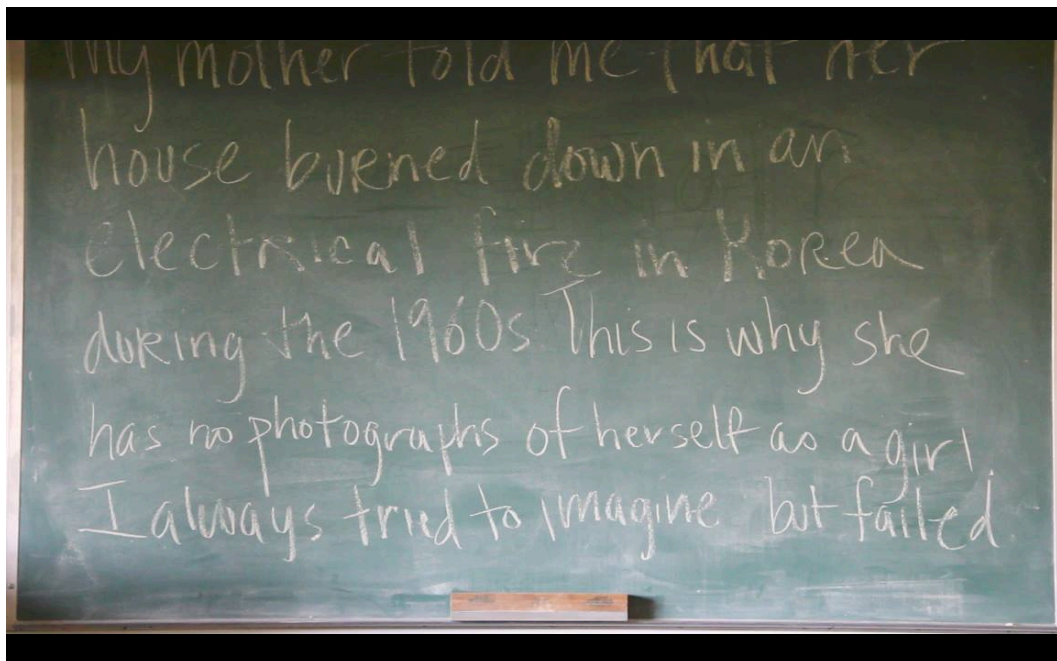


Figure 5.3: Chalkboard #3, *Water/Memory* (2014-present)

## II.

ARS MORIDENDI/THE ART OF DYING

BLACK SCREEN.

Maman.

Premier. Un rêve.

Vide. Un cauchemar.

엄마.

우선. 꿈.

無(무). 악몽.

Omma.

First. A dream.

Void. A nightmare.

FADE IN:

LONG SHOT. You're being pulled away by a black horse into the woods. You're in a wooden box with wheels and no lid. I hear the steadiness of hoof prints; the wind whistling through the boughs. Almost barren: as if it is still winter here.

JUMP CUT. There are branches overhead. I hear them. My heart beats fast. I hear that, too. My vision shutters. The earth threatens to swallow me. And the wind is colder than the death to which I must have surrendered.

Am I me, or am I you? Do I see these terrors with my own eyes, or do they see through you?

There is no partition.

LONG SHOT. I must be reaching for you. I don't see my hands, but I know they are. If I shout for you, I can't hear it. If night is coming, it is a blanket with no stars.

There is only you, racing towards the eternal thicket of trees.

And there is only the wind – laughing and wailing, wailing and laughing.

FADE OUT.

## III.

In the Winter of 2003, I encounter the film, *Deutschland, bleiche mutter* (*Germany, Pale Mother*) (1980), directed by Helma Sanders-Brahms, for the first time. A feminist hallmark of the New German Cinema, Sanders-Brahms takes her cue from Bertold Brecht's poetic indictment to explore the unsettled histories of German fascism and terror in a minor key, the quiet devastation of

national narrative played out on a close scale through a mother and her daughter / a daughter and her mother.

Though I will watch this film once more *after* this – yet both times distinctly *before* the beginning of my mother's cancers (a *before* that I can now barely remember, a *before* of when my mother's body went to war against her) – I recall the final scene with the icy shock of clarity.

The mother, Lene, enters the bathroom and turns on first the gas then the bathtub faucet. She has no expression. She quietly shuts the door and locks it. Her daughter, Anna, is left alone in the hall. Though nine years old, Anna is already aware of her mother's intention to kill herself.

The camera shows Anna's back as she stands at the door. She begs for her mother to come out while banging her small hands against it.

The door will not open.

The camera cannot leave her as much as it will never console her either. There is scarcely the sound of wood rattling and water running, the cruel, constructed terms of life and death, buoyancy and engulfment.

The duration is unbearable to watch. The duration distills the strain of endurance in the face of so much loss, violence, and trauma. The duration is history wrenching open and apart the seams of everyday life.

Finally, the water stops. The door slowly opens. A soft piano music begins to play (the melody is elusive, but the suggestion of the notes lingers). The camera shows first Anna being held by Lene's arms then pans up towards Lene's face: disfigured and partially frozen by her postwar misery.

Lene looks outwards, slowly turns her head in profile, then turns back again. A barely imperceptible breath seems to make her face shudder for a second then resumes its silent/silenced mask.

Something has been lost in the breach, something that can never be recompensed or recuperated. The adult Anna speaks, but her words are meaningless. They fail. The will towards knowledge is a dis-ease, and the will towards future, a stone wall: ambivalent, even terrible, but mutual.

*The subject of distance, the distance of pain.*

*Divided within and without.*

Even now, I replay this sequence of images in my mind, but the shot of Lene's face dissolves into my mother's. And Anna, as child and as grown-up, who will never find any solace, becomes me.

When my mother opens the door, her face has lost its familiarity. She speaks as if a guest in her own body, saying it is not death she wishes for any longer – but sleep, dark and dreamless. *There*, her lips move, almost without sound, as if her breath's expiration is what is forming the words, *is where I will never wake up and never feel pain again.*

Her desire is larger than the fiction of all the names I call her and all the names she calls herself. I will press it into my *ma-eum* (heart-spirit), fold it over and over again till it becomes a small bird I will one day free from my chest, its paper wings touched by blood (hers or mine, I'm not certain) and beating into a cloudless sky.

## IV.



Figure 5.4: Her Life to Live, Close-Up



Figures 5.5: My mother's nostalgia for photographs

In the Winter of 2014, I enroll in a graduate film and video production seminar with Professor Zeinabu irene Davis. On that first Friday morning of class, I recall stalling for time in the downstairs hallway of the Communication



Department building. With arms folded taut against my chest, I fidget with my cell phone with one free hand, taking a few deep breaths before my hesitant first steps into the studio. After an extended period struggling with what was diagnosed as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder, my footing feels unsteady, unsure if this is where I should be. But I hear the voice of my new therapist – a specialist in Asian American families, trauma, and grief counseling – encouraging me to take up an activity that will trick my body away from the doubt that always sabotages my mind. “Do something you’ve always wanted to try,” he suggests. “Something that takes you outside yourself and focus your energy on a process.”

While my track record as a graduate student has been inconsistent at best, full of chronic absence and underachievement, for once I stop thinking and start doing. After so many years of *theorizing* about film through poststructuralism or semiotics, learning how to construct my own images and sounds through the use of a digital video consumer camcorder, Marantz audio recorder, and Adobe Premiere Pro gives me a fresh perspective on the importance of *execution* between the knowledge and the practice of things. Finally, along with Professor Zeinabu’s watchful eye, I form close bonds with other students of color from the Ethnic Studies Department whose solidarities and “deep organizing” skills keep me grounded.

Our assignment for the quarter is to develop a media project where we can demonstrate our proficiency with an aspect of visual and/or audio recording. While I entertain a few possibilities, I am encouraged by Professor Zeinabu and my classmates to pursue my idea to interview my mother.

Surprisingly, when I ask my mother about participating in my video interview, she is not hesitant. She only wants to know what it is for, who is going to watch it, and why I would want to film her.

The following is my original film treatment submission.

**Working Title:** *Mourning/Calm*

**Logline:**

*Mourning/Calm* is a mixed media documentary and visual experiment that delves into a son's emotionally vexed and complex relationship with his Korean immigrant mother as she makes her difficult recovery from multiple battles with cancer.

**Synopsis:**

How does one unravel the tense and tangled ties of life and loneliness, death and debt? *Mourning/Calm's* formal/narrative structure is achingly and sometimes erringly circular in nature, breathing itself into visual existence through the desiring body of a documentary format that is always in search for stories and images that may or may not even exist. Set in the San Francisco Bay Area and San Diego, the film begins with voiceovers against a darkened screen where the son provides a furtive contemplation into his mother's illnesses as it crosses paths with his own ongoing struggle with posttraumatic stress disorder from the many years he spent taking care of her. Drawing upon a "minor" archive of personal reflections from his mother and himself, diaries, dreams, nightmares, songs, and photographs (both collected from albums and constructed for this project), what he encounters

through his journey are the ways images and words fail him. The precariousness of the life that surrounds *and* obscures her runs up against the constant pressure of clocks that never stop and the decomposition that follows time's passage.

As much as he is driven by the desire to excavate his mother's "identity" and "experience" as more than just sociological containments of *Korean immigrant mother/wife/woman*, the more he understands that its fulfillment eludes him like water. Instead, he grapples with the fragments of memory that express what Korean culture describes as *han* (her pain, trauma, and survival, her dreams lost, deferred, and held deep inside): *her han* that simply exceeds and flees past him. The more he strives to document his mother, the more he finds a trail of speculations in its stead that do not fall into "true" / "false" binaries but rather coalesce into an immigrant's "army of refusals" for what lies and lives beyond representation. He contemplates: what does / must his mother keep for herself in a life that is marked by so many departures, so much loss? What was never meant for him to know in the first place? And finally what other kinds of relationships (to these images, to ourselves, to each other) can be gleaned and created that have the potential to break the chains of grief and violence, can hold us and heal us instead?

**Key Characters:**

*Omma*, Mommy, Mother (56)

Son (31)

### Collected Visual and Audio Materials:

Filmed Interviews with Mother at Home in Bay Area

Photographs of Mother (Past and Present)

*Dictee*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

“Piano Trio No. 2 in E-Flat Major: II. Andante con moto,” Schubert

“Misty,” Sarah Vaughan

“Try A Little Tenderness,” Otis Redding

These two paragraphs condense an encounter between my intellectual training, my artistic aspiration, and my relationship with my mother. Reading these words, I see so many statements that are meant to be questions to ask myself, more so than a film treatment. These questions are meant to help me embrace the *process* (and the processing) that is involved in taking up a practice, even as much as I am still learning how to translate the complexity of my ideas in a visual form.

The following is the original list of questions I developed as a class assignment. These are questions that are open-ended enough to avoid the pitfalls of *yes* or *no* but also directed enough to stay on track with a theme. As a side note, the two Korean sentences under the title are pulled directly from Google Translate and contain the awkward, possibly incorrect diction and grammar of a mechanical translation.

#### Film Interview Questions

나는 당신에게 질문을하겠습니다. 당신의 대답에 질문을 말해야한다.

(“I am going to ask you questions. Please include the question at the beginning of your answers.”)

1. Tell me about your girlhood. Describe what you can remember of where you grow up, what your household was like, and what your most vivid memory of that time is.
2. Tell me some of your dreams and goals for the future before you immigrated to the United States? If you had stayed in South Korea, what kind of life do you think you would have had? What did you most want to be, and why?
3. Tell me about the moment when you found out you were leaving for the United States. What do you remember about this decision, and how you felt?
4. Tell me about your impressions and feelings about leaving there and coming here. Describe the plane ride and the moment you landed in California. How did you feel? Who were you with, and who was waiting for you at the gate?
5. You once told me about a road trip you took with your sisters through the Southwest to the South immediately after your arrival. Tell me about this trip, and what your first impressions of "America" were like.
6. Tell me about the time of your illnesses.
7. How do you think your illnesses changed your perspective of your self and your body? Of your life? Of everything around you?

8. Tell me some of the things you do on a daily basis now. What are some of the things that give you happiness in your everyday life?
9. Tell me about the things you feel you've accomplished. What are you most proud of in your life? What do you hope for in the future?
10. What do you hope for from me as your son?

On the morning of my Southwest flight bound for Oakland, I have a brief meeting with Professor Zeinabu after class. I show her some of my rough sketches of the floor plan of my family's house for the weekend shoot, and we double-check to make sure I have enough microphones (wired and wireless Lavaliers, PZM, et al). She gives me last minute advice on what to keep in mind. I jot down all of her reminders before I run off to the airport: "K.I.S.S. (Keep It Simple, Stupid)!" "Don't worry about the style – focus on the contents, the rest will come in post-production." "Don't think too much with the camera." And most importantly, "Get good sound!"

I am "too equipped to quit" (as I caption an Instagram snapshot of my unwieldy assortment of luggage) and armed with my questions that I rehearse on the plane. While I originally imagined that the video would focus in on her illness, it dawns on me that while we have spent a lifetime together, I have never asked my mother about her stories and feelings about anything. After the sudden death of my grandmother in 2008, one of my biggest sources of grief was that I always *thought* about recording her life history, but I always postponed the idea till it was too late. This interview represents an

opportunity to create a document, if even for the family archive. I also realize that beginning the interview with cancer could be emotionally and psychologically overwhelming for my mother. It is better to start with the life that surrounds the illness, rather than the other way around.

On both days, I wait till the late afternoon when she comes home from working at the East Oakland liquor store my parents have owned for two decades. I record brief notes in my notebook to remember the details of what we discuss as well as reminders to myself on what to do the next day. The first day, we shoot between 3:00-4:30 PM; the second day, between 2:00-3:00 PM. Per Professor Zeinabu's suggestion, we spend time shooting in rooms where my mother spends the majority of her time when she is not working: the living room, family room, kitchen, and dining room. Having her stay relaxed is a key concern. Additionally, since this is my first time putting my camera and audio skills to the test, the predictability of a closed, controlled environment helps to allay the anxieties I have about making mistakes around lighting, white balance, and shot composition (although they show up, regardless).

There are two things that stand out to me from that first weekend shoot:

1. We began with my mother looking through a photo album from my birth and early childhood. Professor Zeinabu and I thought that this would be a good device to have her start telling stories without the intrusion of the camera in her face. However, the photo album turned out to be a gift in disguise as my mother was a natural storyteller. She

had an innate narrative sensibility where she could start with one memory and connect it so many others with detail and ease. Even though some of the photographs were 25-30 years old, she was able to recall those moments as if they had just happened in the recent past. While her happiness in recounting her first days as a mother was evident, I was struck by her memories of her early life in the United States. The one that stands out to me is her first road trip across the Southwestern and Southern states with her sisters in the late 1970s. Hearing her recollect on being a recent immigrant on the road, her attempts to use the English she had been taught in her South Korean education with white Americans, and seeing the Mississippi River for the first time was a revelation.

2. My technical mistakes began to occur during the second day of shooting when the interview centered on my mother's diagnosis, treatment, and recovery from uterine and colon cancers. While I had lived through so many of those experiences with her, I had forced myself to forget or blocked them out of my mind. To have to revisit those moments through my mother's voice while I stood behind the camera was difficult, especially when she was overcome with emotions. When I rewatch the footage now, I can see how my camera begins to trail off to one side and back, the lighting becomes too light then too dark, the color suddenly switches. These are all mistakes I will have to correct in post-production or cover-up through editing strategies. However, if Brian En suggests, "Honor thy error as a hidden intention,"



I understand mine here to be a manifestation of my own pain through the camera. I learned about the complex position I occupy as someone who is both intimately tied to the subject who is being filmed but also having to learn how to create critical distance in order to shoot and edit from the perspective of a filmmaker. This is a balance I am still learning how to achieve.

#### IV.

By the Winter of 2009, I am almost exactly three years removed from my mother's first diagnosis with uterine cancer and halfway through the fiscal year as a Youth Program Coordinator for the Asian Youth Prevention Services (AYPS) at the Korean Center, Inc. (KCI) in San Francisco Japantown. Although KCI is specifically a Korean American social service agency, the middle school and high school youth I serve are, for the most part, pan-ethnically Asian. In addition to different trainings for Child Protective Services, cultural competency, and mental health reporting, I have many meetings with Ramon Calubaquib, the long-time director of AYPS, to figure out how to tackle community needs throughout the course of my work. More than just tall, Ramon is upright: stern in his expression but always quick to share his over three decades of experience. He tells me that it has been an ongoing challenge to reach out to Korean American youth in the city. Most of them, he explains, are disinterested by or disconnected from the programs that AYPS offers. Korean American youth tend to find their social and spiritual communities through the insular network of Korean churches, and if not the church, they

find themselves acculturating with other racial/ethnic groups in and out of school.

“They have a way of blending in or falling through the cracks,” Ramon surmises. “But the issues are still there.” The majority of these issues tend to stem from the compounded dramas of family dysfunction: the intense pressures of academic achievement, the high stress of working-class immigrant households, the persistence of physical and emotional neglect and abuse, language barriers, a lack of communication between first and second generation, a lack of access to health care and insurance, depression, suicide, and the stigmas attached to mental illness, and gang involvement. The list is overwhelming and all too familiar. *Falling through the cracks* can mean skipping school or dropping out altogether, dashing the hopes of admittance to a prestigious four-year college or university, a key piece of so many Korean immigrant dreams. It can mean finding forms of belonging and affiliation that can counter traumatic, broken family structures all the while running the risk of self-destructive, “delinquent,” or otherwise “bad” choices.<sup>100</sup> It can also mean engaging in reckless behaviors that do not *heighten one’s sensations* so much as they attempt to, temporarily and sometimes permanently, suspend or obliterate one’s bond to space, time, and self.

At the beginning of my term, I enter the renovated three-story Victorian that houses KCI and slip into the dim narrow walls of my office armed with

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<sup>100</sup> My use of the terms “criminal” and “bad” here are not meant as judgments, nor am I reinscribing the problematic belief in a hegemonic “law and order” that undergirds youth developmental processes. I use these terms consciously to show how discourse toward youth behavior is surrounded by pathological assertions rather than providing a social, cultural, and political context.

an excess of energy and ideals, not to mention a still-fresh Ethnic Studies degree – where I wrote my Senior Honors Thesis on the emergent poetics and politics of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots through the naming of *Sa-i-gu* and the Korean cultural concept of *Han*. Additionally, after a tumultuous year of graduate school in the Midwest, I have taken a leave of absence from academia with no intention to ever return. I am determined to do “work that matters,” work that *holds* matter, that will leave a tangible impact in the lives of those I serve. This nonprofit narrative template is one that many others have followed before me and will follow after. It does not take long for me to be brought back down to ground zero. Other AYPS consortium coordinators will soon tell me that my program has long been “out of touch” and “a sinking ship.” My Program Manager – who is also my same age and my sole confidante in the agency – is far wryer with her words: “This is the Korean War, Anthony. If you can survive this, you can survive *anything*.”

The lack of metaphor does not escape me. Not *like a war* but *is*.

*We must survive. There is no choice.*

KCI’s Youth Program, I discover, is a low to no priority for its Board of Directors – mostly older Korean immigrant men who are invested in a repressive strain of neo-Confucian patriarchy and do not or will not comprehend, conceptually and financially, what “serving the community” entails. They view my function as a “glorified babysitter.” KCI’s Youth Program, I also discover, is a vacuum of institutional memory because of the high turnover rate of previous Youth Program Coordinators. In essence, I have no money, no staff, and no infrastructure (save for a monthly Muni pass

provided by the Center), yet my list of responsibilities is inexhaustible: preventative education for alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD); case consultation and management for mental health; meetings with youth one-on-one and in groups all over the city; devising and overseeing lunchtime activities and afterschool programs; general nonprofit management; and making and submitting the crushing monthly demands of units of service (UOS). There is no space for program development, because the daily operations consume all of my time.

By now, I have reconciled myself to the fact that I will fulfill my contract then find another job. I have already been informed, off the record, that KCI will be cut from the AYPS consortium after over five years of chronic underperformance. I represent the end of the line, and my job now is to steer failure towards completion. This does not mean, however, that my work is any less hectic as I always far exceed the 32.5 hours of my weekly employment. On the other hand, I find ways to create small pockets of community and coalition building, even while knowing that my efforts will be subsumed and forgotten after the imminence of my departure. With the rest of the AYPS consortium, I speak on behalf of the Korean American community at a city hearing on public health. I offer my time to protecting low income housing for Korean senior citizens much to the chagrin of one board member who angrily claims that I can only engage in board-sanctioned forms of community organizing. I meet with Chol Soo Lee, the Korean American whose wrongful conviction for a murder in 1973 galvanized an Asian American movement to win his freedom in 1983. I volunteer as a Teaching

Assistant for a history class through the Prison University Project (PUP) at San Quentin State Penitentiary. I also reach out to the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University (SFSU) where I am able to secure a Filipino American program intern and partner with Professor Grace Yoo.

While trained as a medical sociologist, Grace brings her indefatigable enthusiasm and interdisciplinary expertise to a number of courses on Asian American and Korean American history and experience. For AAS (Asian American Studies) 360: Koreans in the United States, we partner on a community-based learning component where students in her class can receive academic credit for volunteering with my program. In one of our conversations, she mentions that she is doing new research devoted to the experiences of 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Korean Americans who have cared for aging and ill family members. Grace is aware that I have been negotiating my mother's ongoing health problems, including a stunning but early second diagnosis with colon cancer that occurs in March. She asks if I would be willing to be a participant in her study. I do not hesitate to accept.

We meet during one of my lunch breaks at a small mom and pop Korean restaurant in the Sunset district. During the interview, my intention is to be as honest as possible in my reflections, even if that honesty is also synonymous with the thwart of heartache. I recount that my decision to return to care for my mother and family was unthinking, although this home is one I had once left with so much haste. Growing up, I had witnessed the long, thankless hours of her life under the merciless design of days that seemed a ceaseless dust storm that clouded over our vision of America, let alone an

American dream. Her life and my father's life, their lives together seemed a quicksand, and I staged a series of escapes, through food, through movies, through school, and finally, through an exodus of geographic distance. Later, in college, I tried to theorize with empathy, empathize through theory, the multiple shifts of her productive and reproductive labors as wife + mother + worker + immigrant + woman; and that this storm took on the names of white supremacy + heteropatriarchy + capitalism.<sup>101</sup> To return *home*, I felt, was my familial *and* ethical response-ability to give something back to her against a world that would just as soon dis-remember and dispose of her. I also begin to unravel the store of resentments I began to harbor towards my mother in having to give up so many of my original plans to work, to travel, and to possess a freedom I knew was problematic yet I envied in so many of my peers, and the guilt I began to feel over these resentments. It was not of my mother's volition to have cancer twice, though the hardships of her life and the *han* that she had pressed so deep inside herself finally broke through into its terrible flowers. Mortality hung so heavy that it made breathing hard. Yet, often, I could not reconcile my antipathy with my sense of duty. "It felt like everyone else had moved on," I confessed. "And I was at home with no life of

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<sup>101</sup> In *Labor of Love: Filipina Single Mothers Transforming Motherhood to Raise Sons*, Filipino American scholar, Rhommel Litz Lara Canare, argues, "Through producing a counter ideology in raising sons, these women share their knowledge to make an impact on the lives of their sons and how they will respond to constructions of patriarchy and their inherited privilege in society—indirectly disrupting dominant gender roles in the future." Canare's intervention shows how his Filipino single mother subjects would not necessarily call themselves feminist, however they are able to rear sons who are critically aware of oppressive structures of gender and learn to "question patriarchal authority." In this way, bearing witness to my mother's life, labor, and love has also impacted my desire to create and inhabit a second generation Korean American masculinity that emphasizes care, compassion, and conscientiousness.

my own. *But*. There is no question that I would do it again for her, a thousand times over, if I had to."

*A thousand times over.*

In the Korean language, one responds to the gratitude of another with the deceptive simplicity of a phrase and blessing, "천만에요" (a thousand times over)." *I would do it for you, again and again, without end, without fail, so that the act is never one but multiplied. Like circles upon circles that ripple across space and time. Like birds of migration that fly from field to field in search of an eternal spring in the austerity of winter, across the map of divisions and entanglements that form the kindness of kinship for those of us who are trapped to ourselves and our sadness on the ground.*

Perhaps what I am learning, then as now, is a theory of love that is rooted in its practice *a thousand times over* through my mother's plumb of stories and silences. I will find *there* the wide, yawning waters of *her feminist politics* that must necessarily surpass the radar of what is considered to be properly political, a feminist politics that inhabits the inner most reaches of her trans-Pacific infused epistemologies and diasporic experiences in ways that sidestep even my desire for knowledge and knowing. I will find *there* my mother who has been categorically fixed for 40 years as a *Resident Alien* in a country where she must always work but cannot vote, who has very little say beyond her shuttling between the spheres of work and home, and who would never even call herself a *feminist* – yet has managed to raise me to be a part of this world. I may call myself so many names – scholar, writer, or artist – the creative wilding of dreams and travels that sometimes flee far past her – but I

am ultimately just my mother's child, who has come to understand the ferocious creativity and brilliance in her immigrant acts of survival against all odds, and who wonders and sometimes laments what other lives she could have had with the opportunities she has passed onto me. Would I, at age 19, have had her blood and guts to leave everything behind (home, friends, the seaside, and an irreconcilable wish to be a teacher of history) and be thrown into this brutal and bewildering planet called *America* without any hope of return?

In *All About Love*, bell hooks writes:

the wounded child inside many males is a boy who, when he first spoke his truths, was silenced by paternal sadism, by a patriarchal world that did not want him to claim his true feelings. The wounded child inside many females is a girl who was taught from early childhood that she must become something other than herself, deny her true feelings, in order to attract and please others. When men and women punish each other for truth telling, we reinforce the notion that lies are better. To be loving we willingly hear the other's truth, and most important, we affirm the value of truth telling. Lies may make people feel better, but they do not help them to know love.

Against disintegration, we, the adult survivors of these wounded children, she who is mother who gave birth to me, both of us living with and against the "paternal sadism" of forced stoicism and violent pleasing, the specter of death that shadows both our paths, we still lay our claims on love. Love: as the terrain where we go to battle together, knowing that we put the fullness of ourselves on the line to risk everything. Love: a happiness as conditional as tragedy (neither last) but love from *here* and *there*, here and elsewhere, as an embattlement, a struggle, a communion, and a growth.



After our interview is over, Grace asks, “Are you sure you want to do work in Cultural Studies? I think you’d be a great candidate for Clinical Psychology instead!”

We share a laugh over that.

In the Fall of 2015, I do a casual search on new scholarship in Korean American studies and chance upon the book, *Caring Across Generations: The Linked Lives of Korean American Families*, co-authored by Professor Grace Yoo and Professor Barbara Kim. My heart skips a beat. Nervously, I pick up the volume, leaf through its pages, and open to Chapter 2 entitled, “Giving Back.”

I read the opening epigram:

It’s kind of a sense of debt that always haunts me. It’s not necessarily a Korean thing as much as it’s like an immigrant [thing], but more like being a child of immigrants. Like that sense of debt that I’ll never be able to repay them for everything they did for me – to be able to go to college and go to grad school – and I felt like I owe it to them.

-Patrick<sup>102</sup>

For a moment, the line that marks the difference between past and present folds over itself. There is everything, and there is emptiness all at once. I feel as if I have walked straight through myself, the seven years that separate me from him, San Diego from San Francisco: as if these words that were spoken by me and recorded by Grace into her tape recorder have been quietly waiting all along and have finally found their way back to me.

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<sup>102</sup> Grace J. Yoo and Barbara W. Kim. *Caring Across Generations: The Linked Lives of Korean American Families*. (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 40.



Figure 5.6: The only surviving photograph of my mother before her adolescence. The majority of their photo albums were burned in an electrical fire in their home in South Korea in the 1960s.



Figure 5.7: My mother at the register of the family store, where she has spent the majority of her days for the past 20 years.

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