

**ANXIETIES OF THE FICTIVE: THE IMMIGRANT AND ASIAN AMERICAN  
POLITICS OF VISIBILITY**

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## Abstract

*Anxieties of the Fictive: The Immigrant and Asian American Politics of Visibility* analyzes Asian American literature and film to theorize the limits of representational politics that depend on visibility and recognition. Dominant discourses in Asian American studies examine the Asian immigrant as a contentious figure in U.S. national politics and culture. This dissertation departs from those frameworks to assess how the figure of the Asian immigrant is touted and suppressed for recognition and legitimacy in the nation and its cultural spheres, and emerges as a source of anxiety in Asian American cultural politics. In historical narratives, the Asian immigrant as a laborer and as a contributor to the nation is used to legitimate the place of Asians in America, but she is also a liminal figure that stands in excess to subjections of visibilities as American as well as Asian American and all its constituent ideals: Asian, Korean, individual, masculine, to name a few. Using cultural analysis, historical contexts, and critical race and gender theory, this project intervenes in common perceptions of the Asian immigrant as only reproductive of politics (i.e. Asian American activism), culture (i.e. ethnicity and race), labor (i.e. capital), and nationalism (i.e. American dream) to illustrate how the Asian immigrant cannot be reconciled under nationalist tropes, narratives, and aesthetics as a subject. Instead, she emerges as a dangerously transgressive and excessive figure that produces critiques of normative formations of subjectivity and identity.

This dissertation periodizes these desires for subjectivity and identity produced against the immigrant as occurring in the late 1970s following the institutionalization of Asian American as a racial and cultural category. I look at how Asian American film and literature, through specific examples and as generic categories, have represented and been defined as “Asian American” in relation to the immigrant to draw out contradictory notions of domestic, racial, and artistic politics and identities. As such, Asian American cultural production cannot guarantee prescriptive and reconciliatory notions of identity between the Asian American, American, and the immigrant. Rather than reading these excesses as failures of America and its legal and cultural apparatuses, the impossibility of subjectivity for Asians in the U.S. points to how Asian American cultural productions reveal alternative and heterogeneous representations of Asian America that are imperceptible, spectacular, and innovative, challenging the disciplinary terms of visibility administered and authorized by institutions and the markets.

I observe these excesses through four cases: Eric Liu’s memoir *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* considers how his racial somatic challenges his claims to national identity underwritten by his articulations of English and its acoustic individualism; in Patti Kim’s *A Cab Called Reliable*, the protagonist, Ahn Joo’s subjectivity as a “Korean-American woman” exceeds the limned terms available by the authorizing narratives of belonging produced by the nation and diaspora; in Justin Lin’s *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the Asian immigrant stands in the shadows of heteromasculinities to critique discourses of equality produced by the state and markets; and Deann Borshay Liem’s adoptee autoethnography *First Person Plural* reconceives the Asian immigrant as a Korean adoptee to disrupt the naturalizing tendencies of family and nation to think of immigrant labors as generative of new formations of belonging and identity.

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## Introduction

In many ways, this project is a hypertext of cultural expressions in my life. It catalogues the affects of immigrant shame, schooling in the burgeoning era of institutionalized multiculturalism, and outlines how culture and, in particular, Asian/American culture was and continues to be a sentient force in my intellectual development and politics, providing a perception of the world as paradoxical, pleasurable, and magical.

This story has origins in classrooms, Presbyterian churches, municipal libraries, movie theaters, dance halls, music clubs, and museums in Illinois, California, Korea, New York, and Minnesota. It begins with my parents, and their parents' curious affairs with Hollywood films, American baseball, western literature, and "classical" art and music. Living in Korea, they were exposed to Western culture through their early travels around the world, but also by Christian missionaries and a foreign military presence. Such transactions contributed to the privileged terms of their immigration to the U.S.

My interest in Asian American film and literature is reflective of my own formal and informal schooling in Asian American culture, which traces its genealogy from the radicalism of the 60s and 70s, and the absorption of its politics through institutionalized multiculturalism in the 1980s. Because of this history, I had a fifth grade teacher who assigned Bette Bao Lord's *The Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* and encouraged me to read Jean Fritz's memoir on her growing up in China with her American missionary parents prior to the cultural revolution. On a similar front, my junior high English teacher assigned Jeanne Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. This education provided an early vision of Asia and America as

transnational contingencies, which was further emphasized when my family relocated to Korea and I graduated from a high school on an U.S. Army base in Pusan, Korea.

It was in negotiating these competing social spheres that I discovered how to identify stifling notions of identity and belonging that were impressed upon me. The sounds of Bikini Kill and riot grrrl feminism and a punk rock critique of capitalism and its cultural politics of racist heteropatriarchy gave me a language and aesthetic to imagine myself. I discovered the affective experience of Asian American cultural politics reading Xerox-ed zines such as Sabrina Margarita Alcantara-Tan's *Bamboo Girl* and Mimi Nguyen's *Worse Than Queer*, and seeing films and performances by Rea Tajiri and Patty Chang. I imagined my livelihood to look like one like Sarah Sze's sculptural manifestations<sup>1</sup>: with no singular points of reference, and with multiple origins and destinations—structurally sound yet precarious, transgressive of its coordinates and lines, materially dense, infinitely excessive, and illustrative yet unrepresentational of her subjectivity as an biracial Asian and white, American woman artist.<sup>2</sup> To me, these writers and artists expressed their distance from the status quo by challenging liberal society's rhetoric of unity, tolerance, and inclusion and its attempts to transcend difference. The music, films, and texts that moved me theorized dissent and absence as important acts of public engagement by rendering race, gender, and sexuality as critical interventions to normativity. Attendant to these ideals were the experiences of community that I found around them, which attended to practices of collaboration and disagreement.

Culture—both good and bad, high and low, and everything in between—gives us ways to imagine ourselves in relation to the worlds around us. Stuart Hall writes, “Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term ‘cultural identity’ lays claim.”<sup>3</sup> As Hall and



the artists and writers I cite contend, what is represented is not congruent to our subjectivities or entirely legible or recognizable to our ways of knowing or seeing. How to theorize these excesses between identity, artistic practice, and the representations that constitute one's subjectivity is a central debate in the study of Asian American culture and its practices.

My project engages this debate by examining the relationship between two common approaches to reading Asian American culture, its practices, and representations in the contemporary moment. One, Asian American culture and its representations are often read through paradigms of in/visibility. Asian American cultural practices are seen as an antidote to the inherent racism of American popular cultures, which contributes to the invisibility of Asian American representations by making orientalist, yellowfaced stereotypes visible.<sup>4</sup>

Two, the monitoring of Asian American representations by Asian American media activists, college students, and critics often results in what scholars refer to as "stereotype criticism."<sup>5</sup> While this method of analysis is challenged, especially in scholarship on Asian American film, identification of racism and stereotypes in visual media constitute popular discussions on Asian American cultural politics as seen on blogs such as *Angry Asian Man* and *Disgrasian*.<sup>6</sup> My intention is not to suggest that these critiques are unsophisticated compared to academic scholarship, or to undermine these two blogs because they are necessary and important critical spaces. My concern is how Asian American cultural critique, when explained through the paradigm of in/visibility and stereotype criticism, guides a bean-counting approach of looking for Asian bodies in a mainstream media and popular culture, which reinstatiates these spheres as sites of emancipation.

These two methods of reading Asian American representations and its cultural practices are complicated by the locality, medium, popularity, and content. For example, Asian American cultural critics often read representations of Asians in mainstream media as representations: fictive, fragmentary, and partial. But works that are categorized as "Asian

American” are often read as marginal, reflective, and representative of Asian American culture, politics, and identity.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Asian American cultural producers depend on the strategic abstraction of what their racial difference purports to authorize consumption. We can see this from popular examples such as Asian American hip hop group, The Far East Movement’s music videos for songs that reached *Billboard’s* Top Ten—“Like a G6” and “Rocketeer,”<sup>8</sup> where members are featured wearing giant sunglasses, and the JabbaWockeeZ, the predominantly Asian American dancing stars of the MTV show *America’s Best Dance Crew*, who are famous for their white masks.<sup>9</sup> In both instances, as artists whose business it is to perform, their racial bodies are on display and categorized as Asian (American) yet their lineaments are obstructed. Differently, Asian American artists and writers such as Adrian Tomine often avoid racial categorization as perceiving “Asian American” as a constraining term, but are often interpellated and categorized as such.<sup>10</sup> The challenge for writers, filmmakers, and artists of Asian-descent is to portray their work as un/representational of their race and its presumed narratives. In/visibility illustrates the dyadic terms of Asian American cultural representation as a desirous and malignant construct.

While this dissertation focuses on Asian American cultural practices—texts by Asian American writers and filmmakers—I read the relationship between mainstream culture and its narratives and Asian American cultural practices are conditioned by “anxieties of the fictive.” Avery Gordon theorizes “the fictive” as challenging sociology’s methodology of visibility and its authorization of truths. She writes, “To the extent that sociology is wedded to facticity as its special truth, it must continually police and expel its margin—the margin of error—which is the fictive. But these facts are always in imminent danger of being contaminated by what is seemingly on the other side of their boundaries, by fictions.”<sup>11</sup> “Anxieties of the fictive” carries multiple, intersecting connotations here. By fictive, I do not mean unreal or fake, but an approach to Asian American culture that traces its texts as hosted by a multiplicity of

references. Asian American culture is not produced outside the confines of American popular culture or in opposition to, but rather is practiced and imagined in relationship to its hegemonic productions.<sup>12</sup>

For one, Asians in the U.S. are always visible, yet their visibilities are accompanied by a danger of being seen as invisible. Invisibility is not the literal elision of Asians from the popular imagination, but rather characterizes the terms of their visibility—to be seen as unreal, ghostly, fake, and fictive in comparison to more desirous (not necessarily ideal) and stable formations of recognition. The racial formations of Asians in the U.S. portray them as “undecidable” subjects in relation to the nation-state and its analogous spheres of recognition such as mainstream media. David Palumbo-Liu writes, “The occasional absence of ‘Asian American’ from racial categories in America reflects the undecidability of the term. Asian/American resides in transit, as a point of reference on the horizon that is part of both a ‘minority’ identity and a ‘majority’ identity.”<sup>13</sup> Asian American subjectivity is constructed in antagonism and proximity to Asia and America, racial minority and American majority. The infinite heterogeneity of Asian American racial formations produces a discursive vulnerability that renders their subjectivity as overdetermined and indeterminate.

Anxieties of the fictive also characterize the tension between artistic practice and aesthetic, narrative, and political representations in Asian American culture. On one hand, fiction is regarded as the ultimate expression of creativity, especially for minority artists. Producing works that transcend and/or transgress racial, gender, and sexual embodiments, and/or present their bodies as formally and narratively abstract are perceived to be critically positive. At the same time, the fictive is also a source of potential angst, especially when it surfaces as stereotypes and representations that lend an easy legibility to Asian American bodies, which contradict desired formations of representation and recognition such as American, radical racial minority, artist, and so forth.

Lastly, I use anxieties of the fictive to conceptualize the impossible terms of subjectivity, and thus, representation for Asians in the U.S. I adapt this phrasing from Mae M. Ngai, who characterizes the illegal alien as an “‘impossible subject,’ a person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved.”<sup>14</sup> Her conceptualization demonstrates how illegal aliens are figures who are technically invisible to the structures of the state and its laws, but require legibility. Their legibility is available foremost through their racialization and its significations in culture. Incorporating Ngai’s conceit that the illegal alien is an “‘impossible subject” to my approach to Asian American culture, I argue that anxieties of the fictive in Asian American cultural practices coalesce around a figure akin to the illegal alien: the Asian immigrant, who feminizes and alienates our relationship to the nation.

It is telling that this project echoes Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, whose book was formative in my intellectual development as an undergraduate student in ethnic studies for theorizing Asian American culture as a site to identify and critique discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. According to Lowe, Asian immigration and its narratives contradict the universalisms of the U.S. nation-state and its cultural formations, I expand upon this contention to study how those contradictions manifest in Asian American cultural practices. When Asian American cultural politics aligns its investments in national recognitions and its concerns with visibility and identity, it depends on the suppression of the Asian immigrant abstracting the relationship between culture, capitalisms, and the states. The figure of the Asian immigrant is central to Asian American political activisms, its labor histories, and the evidential narrative of American citizenship and cultural identity. Sheng-mei Ma writes, “[T]he immigrant’ is shown to have become a contentious discursive site for self-definition and self-empowerment by Asian Americans and by immigrants themselves. The process of searching for identity goes beyond mere individual efforts, but it derives from as well as contributes to larger cultural ethos. Needless to say, ‘we’ must define ourselves as opposed to, or through the

difference from, ‘them’—aliens or immigrants.”<sup>15</sup> While Ma notes that Asian American identity as a domestic identity is produced in opposition to the alien or immigrant, my analysis of various examples of Asian American literature and film portray how Asian American identity is dependent on a contradictory and conflicted relationship of making the immigrant visible and invisible. The Asian immigrant, and what she signifies, is troubling to Asian American politics of visibility.

She is a figure that illuminates the livelihoods that cannot be apprehended through recognitions and visibilities of subjectivity. I build upon Lowe’s observations to note the conflicted ways that the Asian immigrant and its analogous creatures emerge as figures of abjection and celebration in Asian American cultural practices as well as its activist politics. The simultaneous gestures of incitement and suppression of the Asian immigrant are tantamount to Asian American claims for recognitions as members of the nation-state as reconciliatory model minorities and radical racial minorities, and its constitutive normative identity formations. She is also the evidence of their demands and denials to domestic and national identity and belonging.

National identifications and recognitions of its legal citizenship and national identity do not prevent conflation with the Asian immigrant and its other fictions such as the FOB, alien-foreigner, and gook among many others, but only enforce the dominance of nationalisms underwriting these divisions. Here, I follow Lowe’s definition of “Asian American culture” as the site generative of a dialectical critique of Asian immigration and its relation to national identity rather than a descriptive category. I expand her notion of “Asian American culture” to consider the representations of the Yellowface Oriental, the Americanized Chinese, and the FOB/gook as constitutive rather than alternative to its very definition. Thus, I define Asian American culture as encompassing representations of Asians through “American” imaginations to register those negotiations. I use “Asian American cultural practices” as texts—literature,

cinema, art, performance, theater, etc—by those residing in the U.S. of Asian-descent. In characterizing them “Asian American,” their works do not necessarily represent or are representative of Asian Americans.

The Asian immigrant is often perceived as a figure that desires or is in need of identity, like the illegal alien, she—figuratively and literally—is antithetical to nation-based identity formations.<sup>16</sup> As an impossible subject, she exists in negation to identity and the nation, and emerges as a feminizing and queer figure unable to represent the nation, and exists in excess to identity formations constructed around norms. These norms, as I explore in this project range from notions of individualism, ethnic identity, racial identity, national identity, and family. In reading Asian American culture for what and how Asians in the U.S. are represented, we often refuse to see everything that exists outside the “aperture of visibility.”<sup>17</sup> Formations of identity and belonging cannot be apprehended through recognitions and visibilities of subjectivity. I do not mean to suggest that the legal rights accorded to citizenship are not necessary and meaningful. Rather, I consider that the meanings we imbue citizenship and its legal rights materialize through social and cultural imaginings. Because of this, our laws and its rights often do not guarantee what they promise. This follows on Harrod Suarez’s observation that “it is not as if nationalism is artificial or false, but it is socially produced and thus, imagined. Imaginative production is at once situated within a particular moment without being wholly determined by it: it is catachrestic by nature.”<sup>18</sup> I examine the Asian immigrant in Asian American film and literature as a way to conceive of the “catachrestic nature” or what I call the “unrepresentationality” of Asian American culture—a signifying terrain that cannot represent what it attempts to plainly describe.

### **Defining Asian American in Literature and Film**

In Asian American cultural studies, literature is often the primary site of study.<sup>19</sup> Comparatively, representations of Asians in visual media—especially film, television, and

recently, online productions—reign as the popular site of Asian American criticism and activism. There are many different reasons for the disparity of attention. For one, historically, the study of literature has pedagogical implications attendant to national identity compared to the study of film, which is perceived to exist in the realm of the popular.<sup>20</sup> Second, films by Asian Americans are produced as small, independent projects because the production of film has been historically expensive, its production requires multiple stages of machinery and labor, and depends on an existing infrastructure and economy that has been dominated by white men. Moreover, due to distribution practices, where and how Asian American films are seen has depended on smaller networks facilitated by film festivals and individuals rather than studios. (Of course, this is changing as filmmaking practices, means of distribution, and viewership amends its technological transformations.) Related to such factors, in the late 1970s, Asian American filmmaking, especially on the East Coast, was formally driven by experimentalism and abstraction that was invested in changing viewing practices. Filmmakers and activists contributed to notions of “Asian American film,” but more importantly, programmers of Asian American film festivals curated the idea of “Asian American cinema” as a transnational construct. This vision coincided with new forms of Asian immigration into the U.S. following the 1965 Immigration Act and the institutionalization and professionalization of film studies and film schools during the 1970s. This confluence of historical moments lead to ambivalences around how to define “Asian American film” compared to Asian American literature, which seems to at least be unified under the premise that it is written in English.

While most Asian American scholarship in Asian American culture discusses the genealogy from the perspective of literature, I see my own relationship to Asian American culture as indicative of a need to examine how both literature and film are central to envisioning Asian American culture as a potentially radical not just politically, but also aesthetically and formally—formation to enact “disidentifications”<sup>21</sup> against a range of

contradictory notions about the normative. Asian American culture and its representations are a critical juncture to dissemble dominant discourses of identity and belonging.

I locate anxieties of the fictive as a response to the institutionalization of Asian American as a racial category and formation of racial visibility following the political radicalism of the 1960s and 70s. The homogenization of ethnic differences into a racial category issued an impetus to consider how such a category would be reflected politically and culturally. The political tenets of this history were complemented by as well as competed with diverse visions of how artistic practice would be defined in relationship to a racial category. Asian American writers, artists, and activists experimented in literature, music, performance, and film by combining artistic, aesthetic, and political modes of dissent that disidentified with bourgeois American values and its legitimized cultural forms and narratives. As seen through the politics of cultural nationalists, notably, Frank Chin, who along with his brethren, saw the designation of an Asian American cultural practice and sensibility as an antidote to the discursive vulnerability of Asian American racial formations exacerbated by American popular cultures as well as academic scholarship. Asian American cultural nationalists defined the relationship of Asian Americans to the nation-state as racial minorities, who embodied and practiced a socially and culturally conscious politics. At the same time, there was Asian American artists and critics, who mobilized similar critiques, but were interested in deconstructing its very terms. This was evident especially in the curatorial vision set out by the first Asian-American Film Festival in New York City. These two sensibilities of Asian American culture overlapped, but also demonstrated different curatorial imaginings around how to define “Asian American.” These conceptions of Asian American were drawn in relationship to the immigrant.

One of the most cited cultural projects that came out of this exciting time was Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong’s *Aiiieeeee!* (1974)<sup>22</sup>, which privileged creative writing and performance as enacting political radicalism. Only by creating



cultural representations could Asian Americans (compared to Americanized Chinese or Asians) recuperate an authoritative agency that would domesticate their identities as national subjects.

The anthology opens with a description of the emergence of such a voice:

Our anthology is exclusively Asian American. That means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans, American born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing ‘aiiiiii!’ Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AAIIEEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice.<sup>23</sup>

Taking their inspiration from what they saw as black culture’s distinct cultural sensibility,<sup>24</sup> the voice of *Aiiiii!* sought legitimacy in the U.S. through culture instead of legislative politics or grassroots organizing to produce institutional and social change.<sup>25</sup> Culture would counter racist stereotypes that permeated the popular imagination and annulled one’s civic and legal rights. Mark Chiang writes, “The audacity of this thesis has rarely been fully appreciated, since it effectively proposes that ‘serious’ literature is the answer to racism and the political disempowerment of the Asian American community. [...] The proposition that literature is the most effective response to racism is posed *against* the kind of cultural politics in which art must be subordinated to the needs of political mobilization.”<sup>26</sup> The editors defined a patently Asian American aesthetic, form, and content that would distinguish an Asian American sensibility from works also produced by those who they deemed as “Americanized Chinese,” writers whose voices had been co-opted and ventriloquized by a capitalist drive to appeal to a white audience’s sociological and ethnographic imagination of China.

Americanized Chinese rehearsed representations of Asian and America as a binary construct that pitted Asian culture against American individualism, and idealized their assimilation as normatively American compared to racially American. The editors describe how perceptions of the incongruence of Asian and American have been detrimental to the Asian

American psyche—leaving “Asian Americans in a state of self-contempt, self-rejection, and disintegration.” They provided a diagnosis for this malaise:

We have been encouraged to believe that we have no cultural integrity as Chinese or Japanese Americans, that we are either Asian (Chinese or Japanese) or American (white), or are measurably both. This myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality haunted our lobes while our rejection by both Asia and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. Nor were we half and half or more one than the other.<sup>27</sup>

A creative and intellectual practice would uplift Asian American men from the subjugation of white authority and the internalization of so much self-hatred their identities had become split and fragmented. Literature enabled the possibility of “cultural integrity” that would unify an Asian American subject as that was portrayed as divided by the borders of white America and ethnic Asia. Literary scholar David Eng writes, “In delineating an integrally and psychically ‘whole’ Asian American subject against this model of either/or split subjectivity, cultural nationalism’s political project was centered squarely on Asian American claims to the space of the U.S. nation-state as enfranchised citizen subjects.”<sup>28</sup> Literature was a medium to authorize oneself as whole, representable Asian American subjects. Instead of challenging nationalist ideologies that racialized Asians in the U.S. at odds with masculinity and citizenship, and unable to be representative of the nation as Americans or as racial minorities, the editors used literature to repress and discipline the feminine and queer excesses attendant to the immigrant that alienated Asian American men from heteronormative masculinity to authorize their place in the nation.

For those in Asian American cultural studies, this history is very familiar, but I point it out to emphasize how the *Aiiiiieee!* collective positioned literature and artistic intent as essential to creating a legible Asian American subjectivity. The editors outlined contradictory notions of an “Asian American sensibility,” which privileged the imaginative and fictive productions of Asian bodies through literature and performance, but their literature also depended on a kind

of realism—an aesthetic that made it Asian American. These representations countered the fictions from American popular culture as well as sociological texts and autobiographical narratives by Asians in the U.S. that they saw as replicating orientalist fantasies. The latter antagonized their cultural and political agendas, and were to be reprimanded. The distinction of what constituted a “real” Asian American sensibility and what constituted a “fake” one was determined by an interesting and complex set of guidelines, which only expanded with the publication of the *Big Aiiieeeee!!!* in 1991.<sup>29</sup> According to Chin, what distinguished his works and works by those he touted were inherently unmarketable, irreproducible, and inconsumable by the machinations of the culture industry and educational institutions because they refused codified notions of Asia. Asian American was not an identity formation that would operate to bridge the cultural differences like an interracial romance, but was a hybrid category unto its own and required a visual and literary treatment that portrayed Asian Americans as a “common experience in the terms of that experience and to celebrate life as it is lived.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time, the desire to maintain a compulsory notion of Asian American culture depended on expelling all that was fictive to their own writings representing Asian American identity: the feminizing, foreign, alien, and immigrant.

My use of anxieties of the fictive is not to promote a psychoanalytic diagnosis that pathologizes Asian American artists as psychically disabled and paranoid about what I associate with the Asian immigrant. Instead, it apprehends the complexities of fiction, representation, and cultural practice for Asian American cultural producers. Asian American cultural producers often lack a creative license to offer their works as demonstrating a strict form of fiction or pure expression, an abstraction to the purported autobiographical tenets of their works. At the same time, to state that it is irrelevant presents another problematic. Elaine Kim writes, “Many Asian American artists express their dismay that both mainstream and Asian American art critics and curators are reading their work as literal expressions of biography or sociology.

Noting autobiography is too frequently used to authenticate their work, as if speaking from personal experience were the only allowable position, they say they want viewers to think about not only *what* they are doing but also *how* they are doing it.”<sup>31</sup> I see fictiveness as an effective affect of Asian American culture that considers the creative and imaginative potential of Asian American cultural practices, and intervenes in disciplinary notions of art, politics, knowledge, and identity. It refuses the provisions of closure often embedded in readings for the autobiographical, sociological, or even in the sublime of aesthetic, instead attending to the anxious possibilities available when re-examining power as imagined and lived.

Held five years after the publication of *Aiiiiieee!*, the first Asian-American Film Festival in New York City organized a notion of “Asian American” around a different set of objectives shaped around the visual. The Festival began as a nod to the experimental and the unconventional, featuring films from high-octane animation by Arnie Wong to community-produced documentaries such as *Cruisin’ J-Town*—a venue for artists to showcase works that were never meant for the Cineplex. One of the Festival’s founders, Daryl Chin, addresses the challenges of organizing around the descriptive of Asian American. In the inaugural program notes written in heavy academic prose, he theorizes upon the dangers of defining “minority identity” as a legitimate and recognizable category. I quote him here at length because it challenges assumptions in Asian American studies that theoretical practice is a recent phenomenon, and Glen Mimura’s argument that Asian American film “undertheorized” notions of community comparatively to black British filmmakers.<sup>32</sup> Instead, we see how Daryl Chin forecasts many theories about Asian American representation embedded in Asian American cultural studies:

The dominance of ideological constraints upon individual expression has determined a variety of contemporary equanimity. Staking out claims of experience, each sect seeks to solidify the particularities of identity, of unity, of existence. Attaching significance to a model of dialectical imperatives, each sect establishes crystalline ideals of the prevailing order; setting up an antagonistic configuration, the symbology demands the status of the alien, the outcast, the

anomaly. Therefore, each sect, seeking acknowledgements, proclaims the right to register as renegades. What evolves is a confirmation of mastery and servitude, domination and oppression, aggression and subservience. Responding to the theatricalization of individuation through entrance into the arena of the symbolic, rhetoric demands the assumption of the role. Acceptance of the role invokes the ritual of naming. Proclaiming identity, each sect declares a province: Black Power, Women's Liberation, Ethnic Pride. The minority asserts uniqueness; by reinforcing the sense of the majority, the minority is rendered visible.<sup>33</sup>

Daryl Chin is cynical about the redemptive possibilities of identity politics highlighting how determining identity in opposition to the majority does not guarantee a sense of “uniqueness,” but instead only grants “the right to register as renegades,” noting how minority identity as a site of recognition depends upon and concedes to the logics of the “prevailing order.” Hence, bureaucracy and identity only begets bureaucracy and identity—replacing minority for majority doesn't seem to do much better.

In problematizing the terms of visibility for minorities, Chin explains that the curatorial vision of the Festival coalesced around two questions, which privileged notions of meaning and form rather than content: “[W]hat is meant by the Asian-American Film? Is there an [*sic*] uniquely Asian-American expression? If so, what are the features of that expression?” The conclusion from the founding committee was that defining a “paradigm” of Asian American film was “inappropriate.” Chin explains, “Specifying an ideal of the Asian-American Film would support the generation of a predetermined signifier; the signified would provide a pristine Image labeled Asian-American. When the multiplicity of expression discouraged the rigidity of preconception, the revised prerogatives demanded at least a plurality in terms of responsivity.”<sup>34</sup> Asian American film was to be defined as responses to dominant discourses around what was Asian American, but also what was film. A dialectical critique rather than a “dialectical imperative.” To uniformly define Asian American film is an impossible task, but also an “inappropriate” one that would result in supporting identity politics (i.e. “the

generation of a pre-determined signifier”) rather than a practice invested in plurality of responses that would theorize the limits and possibilities of such designations and its images.

Such a curatorial sensibility depended on a different kind of presence, one that would exist to watch films in non-commercial spaces that encouraged artistic expression, political dialogue, and communal experience. Yet, the complex terms in which they set out to theorize and present Asian American film, and to support its practice as invested in “alternative modes and alternative models”<sup>35</sup> slowly evaporated by the mid-1980s with diminishing support for the arts. In 1987, ten years after the first Festival, Daryl Chin remembers how the Festival was organized with attention to the experimental, and observed an embrace of “conventional filmmakers” and particular tropes, which contributed to changes in to “the Asian American film community.”<sup>36</sup> Asian American no longer challenged the “rigidity of preconception” by embracing the plurality of expression, sensibility, and form imagined by Asian/American filmmakers, but depended upon alignments of identity and content to affirm stereotypes of Asians in the U.S. He writes, “Being Asian American does not necessarily have to mean being an immigrant, dealing with ‘foreign’ culture because one’s home life is still derived from the old country, or living in a ghetto? [...] After the very first Asian American Film Festival, we asked ourselves whether or not a film qualified as Asian American just because the filmmaker happened to be Asian American. After looking at all the movies which came through the first festival, our decision was yes.”<sup>37</sup>

These changing curatorial approaches and filmmaking practices were produced in relationship to the institutionalization of Asian American film by the Corporation of Public Broadcasting, which privileged documentary as the appropriate genre to depict Asian Americanness. These changes occurred in relationship to the commercial drive of the Film Festival ushered with decreased arts funding and dependency on corporate sponsorship, which required marketing to Asian/American audiences with palatable films. As I will elaborate in

Chapter 3, these changes continued to emphasize correlatives that Asian American artists only produced content that was reflective of their identity. For Daryl Chin, like Frank Chin, the designation of “Asian American” was a lens, a sensibility that exposed the limitations of the commercial, mainstream, and its confines of normalcy. But the two points of view diverge. For the film critic, Daryl Chin, an Asian American sensibility was to evoke the plurality of the “Image.” It was to render its subjectivity as impossible rather than stable. I would argue part of this curatorial practice was contingent upon a transnational queer and feminist politics that was entrenched in his vision of Asian America.

While the debates around Asian American literature largely figured around the kinds of representations writers were producing, in Asian American film these debates were entrenched in curatorial practices of organizers of Asian American film festivals—Asian CineVision in New York, Visual Communications in Los Angeles, and the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA, now the Center of Asian American Media) in San Francisco. To draw on a personal anecdote, when I was working at the Asian American Film Festival from 2001 to 2008, Daryl would always remind me of the anti-gay politics were emblematic of what kind of films would be shown at Asian American film festivals in New York and in San Francisco and Los Angeles. As Daryl would recollect, this revolved around his desire to screen a film by Jon Moritsugu, who refused the invitation based on the fact that he did not feel like his film was “Asian American.” For Daryl, the institutionalization of Asian American film under CPB proved problematic as it depended on asserting normative notions of Asian America, which were largely emblemized through the figure of the immigrant. He writes, “[D]oes anyone know how many films there are about (for example) Chinese-Americans making a trip to China to visit the land of their fathers or mother? Do you want me to tell you how many films like that there are? Or how many films there are where the filmmaker has interviewed his or her family about their experiences as immigrants? This year,

for example, eight such films came over the transom during the selection period for the Asian-American Film Festival. I am not kidding: eight! The only one of those films which was hotly debated was one in which the filmmaker turned out to be gay (and she acknowledged herself as such). Do I hear hints of prejudice within the Asian-American media community? You bet!”<sup>38</sup>

For cultural nationalists, Asian American identity was to be made whole and stable, and the figure of the immigrant was a feminizing and queer figure, antithetical to identity. For Daryl Chin, we see how the immigrant becomes a trope that becomes emblematic of a normativity that produces a hegemonic definition of Asian American cinema. My examination of these diverging approaches to definitions of Asian American culture calls attention to how the Asian immigrant surfaces as a source of contention and anxiety.

### **Anxieties of the Fictive, Anxieties of the Immigrant**

Recent scholarship in Asian American culture examines the conflicts in Asian American political unity and cultural expression following the institutionalization of Asian American studies and culture. These debates convey the complicated terms of visibility and representation in Asian American cultural politics. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues the alignment of Asian American culture, politics, and people as inherently resisting dominant ideologies surface in a “crisis of representation” because it fails to resolve those who refuse categorization as Asian American and its assumed politics such as Eric Liu, whose memoir I examine in Chapter 1. Differently, Kandice Chuh reads the incommensurability of Asian American culture and its people as demonstrating critical fissures around demands for political unity. She argues that such desires for cohesive representation only serve to reiterate nation-based formations of identity and belonging, which depend on suppression of differences. And most recently, Mark Chiang in a meta-metacritical turn, argues that Nguyen and Chuh’s critiques around the crisis of representation are symptoms of the institutionalization of Asian American studies and, in particular, its attentions in literary and cultural studies, which have depoliticized the impetus of



fields such as Asian American studies. Chiang names this relationship between Asian American culture and Asian American community as defined by Asian American literary scholars as “nonrepresentative representation,” which uses theoretical constructions of Asian American differences to politically represent a cultural agenda rather than actual “*people*” (his emphasis) and politics. In following his logic, Chiang calls for realigning the relationship between culture and identity for the purposes of political accountability to those Asian American studies portends to represent. He argues this political relationship has been abstracted by privileging a politics of difference as often theorized by Asian American feminist and queer scholars.<sup>39</sup>

I reconsider Chiang’s notion of nonrepresentative representation to examine how the source of anxiety in Asian American cultural representations is not necessarily the discrepancies with the politics, the culture, and the *people*, but rather those fissures coalesce around the immigrant. The immigrant is central to the political and cultural representation of Asian America. The ethnic immigrant is an especial figure affirming the exceptionalism of the American dream.<sup>40</sup> But, following the insights of Lisa Lowe, the Asian immigrant is a figure that confounds the expected telos of the immigrant from ethnic to individual. If the imagined assimilation of the ethnic immigrant structures a narrative temporality of progress and integration intrinsic to American identity and its national ethos, representations of the Asian immigrant and Asians in the U.S. challenge the rigid linearity of these cultural narratives. Their status as domestic subjects is negated by the racial excesses of their ethnic assimilation, which registers as alien to national culture and identity. While the assimilation of Asians in the U.S. produces uneven results, I emphasize that Asians in the U.S. are subjects of assimilation to consider how we are never outside of the powers of culture and its representations. Asian American history portrays how assimilation does not incorporate Asians in the U.S. into America or as Americans, but rehearses their exclusions by marking their differences. In spite of imaginations of successful integration and identifications to American culture for Asian

American men such as Takao Ozawa, Bhagat Thind Singh, Fred Korematsu, Vincent Chin, and Wen Ho Lee, the inassimilability of the racial somatic and its gendered terms defers their legal and cultural status as American to dangerous effects. This looping effect is disruptive to the primacy of America's narratology, and resonates as "Asian American culture." Lisa Lowe writes:

Rather than attesting to the absorption of cultural difference into the universality of the national political sphere as the 'model minority' stereotype would dictate, the Asian immigrant—at odds with the cultural, racial, and linguistic forms of the nation—emerges in a site that defers and displaces the temporality of immigration. This distance from the national culture constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen into the nation. Rather than expressing a 'failed' integration of Asians in to the American cultural sphere, this distance preserves Asian American culture as an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulation.<sup>41</sup>

Asian American culture and its practices do not expand borders for inclusion, but rather critique its terms for emergences of alterity. This relates to my previous point: Lowe notes how the Asian immigrant "defers and displaces the temporality of immigration," but the Asian immigrant is still subject to its processes, which animate knowledges and its cultural practices that disidentify and challenge nation-based formations of identity and belonging. Culture is a site of discipline, but in its demands for conformity and complicity enacts dissent and resistance. Asian American culture is never outside of the means of power, it emerges from its conditions. It is not a liberatory site that recuperates proper or good Asian Americans nor is it celebratory, but generates critiques of power by rendering it material *through* its representations and in turn, imagines and practices alternative formations of identity and belonging.<sup>42</sup> In turn, I explore how Asian American culture and the works that evolves out of this category trace this crisis of representation as coalescing around the Asian immigrant.

The crisis of representation between Asian American cultural practices and its politics is conditioned by anxieties of the fictive. I argue these affects coalesce around the liminal figure

of the immigrant. On one hand, the abstraction of the Asian immigrant in Asian American culture is the abstraction of the relationship between culture and the capital: the reproductivity of her racial body. The Asian immigrant is aestheticized as cultural capital to support hegemonic tropes and narratives that maintain fictions of nation-based formations of identity—as racial minorities and American majorities. This is seen especially in Asian American criticism around PBS documentaries. But the representation of the Asian immigrant, as noted by Daryl Chin and inadvertently by Frank Chin, is also bemoaned for its generic and industrial reproductions that limit representations of Asian Americans as normative and/or queer against petitions for artistic autonomy and national identity. For Asian American artists, the Asian immigrant transmits essentialized notions of racial difference, culture, and politics, and translates their works as always represented, representational, and representative as surplus against the sublime of art (i.e. whiteness). In considering such competing desires, Lisa Lowe reminds us, “Asian immigrants and Asian Americans have been neither ‘abstract labor’ nor ‘abstract citizens,’ but have been historically formed in contradiction to both the economic and the political spheres” (28). Likewise, Asian American cultural practices are always marked, they are always seen as re/produced. In the case of the former, I argue that in spite of her apprehension towards reproductions of nationalisms and its cultures of capitalisms that we can read her otherwise. Her excesses operate in negation to the universalisms accorded with capital, citizenship, and art.

The dissertation is organized in two halves according to the mediums of film and literature. Chapters 1 and 2 examines Eric Liu’s memoir *The Accidental Asian: Notes from a Native Speaker* and Patti Kim’s novel *A Cab Called Reliable*, two books that I first read as an undergraduate student, to consider how for Asians in the U.S. practices of creative writing and in particular, articulations of English are imagined to authorize identity as a stable and legible formation. For example, Frank Chin and the editors of *Aiiiiieee!* use improper articulations of

English to accord their literatures a realism that is representative of an Asian *American* sensibility and reflective of their identities as domestic subjects and racial minorities. Here, I examine how creative practices of writing in English for Asians in the U.S. do not authorize identities as domestic Americans or diasporic Koreans.

It might seem strange that I chose Eric Liu's *The Accidental Asian*, a book that is characterized as traitorous to Asian American activist politics. After all, the artists that turned me on to Asian American cultural practices discussed the excesses of normalcy rather than aligning Asian American with mainstream ideals that would validate us as "normal." But I felt drawn by the challenge of re-reading his memoir, and the ease in which he imagined his identity as an individual compared to those "Professional Asian Americans," who he contends maintains the categorical relevance of Asian American. His personal story represents how the very form in which he expresses his individualism—the memoir—sustains such fictions of individualism. I don't use "fiction" or "fictive" to indicate his identifications as unreal, but rather to emphasize how they become imagined. For Liu, his English and identity as a "Native Speaker" authorizes and authenticates his relationship to the nation as ontic, but this individualism is exacerbated by his anxieties of his racial somatic. These anxieties coalesce around his contention that even though he can speak for Asian Americans, the category cannot adequately reflect his post-racial individualism.

Chapter 2 examines Patti Kim's *A Cab Called Reliable* to further understand the limitations of Liu's post-racial cultural politics of language as authorizing his claims to nation-as-home, but also quells a parallel desire to use diaspora as productive of belonging that is alternative to the nation-state. This is expressed through the novel's protagonist, Ahn Joo, and her writings, which critiques the disciplinary and oppressive conditions of the American dream as well as the heteronormative implications of belonging and identity in diaspora. Instead, the

novel imagines a “reparative diaspora” that highlights the racial and gender terms of diaspora and its formations of un/belonging.

The second half of this dissertation focuses on Asian American film to re-read the Asian immigrant as a figure is both central and marginal to Asian American cultural politics. In Chapter 3, I examine how Justin Lin’s film *Better Luck Tomorrow* and its validation by Hollywood is touted as a “break” from the generic perception of Asian American cinema and its trope of “ethnic explaining” that coalesced during the 1980s with the support of the Corporation of Public Broadcasting (CPB) and its network PBS. *Better Luck Tomorrow* exemplifies an Asian American representational politics of normal, which departs from recognitions as national subjects through the nation-state, and privileges the privatized markets of the “mainstream” as the site of emancipation, affirming Asian Americans as consumers and “universally” consumable. By relating the discourses around *Better Luck Tomorrow* to an important moment of Asian American visibility that had national resonance: the murder and activism around Vincent Chin, we observe discourses of normal are contingent upon the logics of American that erect racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies that require rendering the figure of Asian immigrant as abject in aspirations for national identity and individualism. Chapter 4 expands focuses on the figure of the Korean adoptee through Deann Borshay’s *First Person Plural*. The Asian immigrant exists as liminal figure, one that is often rendered as needing an identity, which makes her an apt character in many PBS documentaries because it promises a predetermined narrative structure. I challenge the telos of assimilation and identity by posing the question: “How is the Asian immigrant an adoptee?” Dominant discourses in Asian American studies have queried how the adoptee is Asian American or an immigrant, but inverting the terms of the question, positions the adoptee as the center of this discourse rather than the immigrant to upend common trajectories of identity formation and its knowledges.

- <sup>1</sup> I'm thinking specifically of Sarah Sze's installation at the Tanya Bonakdar Gallery of *The Uncountables (Encyclopedia)*, 2010, installation, mixed media. See the YouTube clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-3nPUCjZQM>.
- <sup>2</sup> I see their works offering an abstraction differentiated from the white masculinity of abstract expressionism as the conditions in which their subjectivities are imagined to produce and take up cultural space are read as surplus and legible compared to the sublime of whiteness.
- <sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York, Columbia UP, 1994), 392.
- <sup>4</sup> Eleanor Ty provides a historical framework to understand the invisibility of Asians in North America in the introduction to *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> Laura Hyun-Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002); Mimi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, eds., introduction to *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–34.
- <sup>6</sup> Phil Yu, *Angry Asian Man*, <http://blog.angryasianman.com/>; Jen Wang and Diana Nguyen, *Disgrasian*, <http://disgrasian.com/>.
- <sup>7</sup> In his film review of *Never Let Me Go* based on Japanese-British author Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, Richard Corliss writes, "When the replicants learn the role they've been designed for, they do not rebel; they submit. This ostensible passivity may perplex some U.S. audiences even more than the humanoid plot twist. 'It's not a very American theme, is it?' says Ishiguro. 'It's antithetical to the American creed of how you should face setbacks—that if you fight back, love conquers all.' No, it's more a Japanese creed, that accepting one's fate is a form of heroism." Richard Corliss, "Never Let Me Go: Everlasting Love," *Time*, September 13, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2015774,00.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> Both music videos are available on *The Far East Movement* official website, <http://www.fareastmovement.com/media/>.
- <sup>9</sup> I thank Christine Balance and John Wong for this insightful reference. Our conversations always lead to fresh examples and theories of Asian American culture.
- <sup>10</sup> "Adrian Tomine, Drawing Delicately from Life," interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, NPR, January 31, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18571923>.
- <sup>11</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting of the Sociological Imaginations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 26.
- <sup>12</sup> Nguyen and Tu write, "[T]hough often unacknowledged, assertion that Asian Americans are not 'outside' of popular culture—whether or not we are imagined by it—and that popular culture is important to the ways in which Asian Americans are not 'outside' of popular culture—whether or not we are imagined by it—and that popular culture is important to the ways in which Asian Americans move (or are not allowed to move) through the world" (3). In *Alien Encounters*.
- <sup>13</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Sheng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), 2.
- <sup>16</sup> See Lisa Lowe, "Epistemological Shifts: National Ontology and the New Asian Immigrants," in *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diasporas*, ed. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 267–276.
- <sup>17</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 123–152.
- <sup>18</sup> Harrod Suarez, "The Insolence of the Filipinas: Mothering Nationalism, Globalization, and Literature" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2010), 5.
- <sup>19</sup> Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York: New York UP, 2009); and Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- <sup>20</sup> See Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson ed., *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008).

- <sup>21</sup> Following the scholarship of Jose Muñoz, I see disidentification as a critique of identity politics. He writes, “Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (11). In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- <sup>22</sup> Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (New York: Mentor, 1991).
- <sup>23</sup> Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!*, xi–xii.
- <sup>24</sup> The first edition of *Aiiieeeee!* was published by Howard University Press.
- <sup>25</sup> All of the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* taught in universities and remain professors in literature and creative writing. Their complex philosophy of how they wanted to define this cultural space as rooted in Asian traditions was compelling in light of Chin’s critiques of the Red Guard, a grassroots community group that operated out of Chinatown. According to Maeda, organizations such as the Red Guard “adopted frameworks that connected anti-Asian racism in the United States to Western imperialism in Asia. Meanwhile, Chin and his cohorts argued that Asian Americans were bound by a common culture that was born and bred strictly within U.S. national borders” (1082). Maeda writes how a scuffle between Chin and members of the Red Guard in Chin’s classroom portrayed the ideological differences that cleaved Asian American activism. In Daryl Maeda, “Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969–1972,” *American Quarterly* 57.4 (December 2005).
- <sup>26</sup> Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies*, 145.
- <sup>27</sup> Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!*, xii.
- <sup>28</sup> David Eng, *Racial Castration in America: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 209.
- <sup>29</sup> Compared to the first *Aiiieeeee!*, which focused its criticisms against “Americanized Chinese” writers like sociologist Betty Sung Lee and C.Y. Lee, who touted narratives of assimilation into America scholarship, *The Big Aiiieeeee!* focused its critiques against David Henry Hwang (*M. Butterfly*) and Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*), whose works were rooted in “Christian dogma and in Western philosophy, history, and literature” (xv). While many Asian American scholars conflate Chin’s criticisms towards Kingston with the publication of *Aiiieeeee!*, it is significant to note this was published in the *Big Aiiieeeee!*. The shifting focus of their critiques is also emblematic of the changes that occurred with institutionalized multiculturalism in the 1980s. In Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, introduction to *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Meridian, 1991).
- <sup>30</sup> Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!*, 22.
- <sup>31</sup> Elaine H. Kim, “Interstitial Subjects: Asian American Visual Art as a Site for New Cultural Conversations,” in *Fresh Talk, Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*, ed. Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida and Sharon Mizota (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 36.
- <sup>32</sup> Glen M. Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 61–62.
- <sup>33</sup> Daryl Chin, *The Asian-American Film Festival* program, 1978.
- <sup>34</sup> This more theoretical approach was followed the next year by a more rigid set of qualifications, Robin Wu notes, “For the Asian American Film Institute, the common denominator of an Asian American is a film... that is a product of an Asian American. Two qualifiers augment this simple definition: (a) the film may exhibit an Asian American consciousness or (b) the film may inform on Asian American history or community.” In spite of who is making films, Wu suggests that it does not necessarily reflect autobiography, noting, “As far what ultimately constitutes an Asian American film, we may discover there may not be an identification imprint as such, aside from the race of the filmmaker. But like Fuding Cheng’s abstract painting, the distinguishing characteristic may well filter through subtly, unconsciously. In the end, it all comes down to... a different point of view” (3). Robin Wu, “Asian American Filmmaking Today and Tomorrow,” *1979 Asian American Film Festival*.
- <sup>35</sup> Daryl Chin, *1985 Asian American International Film Festival*.
- <sup>36</sup> Daryl Chin, “After Ten Years: Some Notes on the Asian American International Film Festival,” *The 1987 Asian American International Film Festival*.
- <sup>37</sup> Daryl Chin, “After Ten Years.”
- <sup>38</sup> Daryl Chin, “Asian-American Video Festival, Some Notes,” *Video Guide* 1988, 10–11.
- <sup>39</sup> Mark Chiang writes, “In its most elementary form, nonrepresentative representation simply hypostatizes contradiction, as exemplified in theoretical constructions of subjectless, difference, catachresis, or what is

arguably the ur-trope of these formulations, strategic essentialism” (12). While he does cite Gayatri Spivak and Kandice Chuh, for me, many of these “theoretical devices” are aligned with Asian American feminist scholars who critique nationalism. In *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies*.

<sup>40</sup> Mae M. Ngai writes, “The myth of ‘immigrant America’ derives its power in large part from the labor that it performs for American exceptionalism” (5). In *Impossible Subjects*.

<sup>41</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 6.

<sup>42</sup> See J.K. Gibson-Graham’s book *The End of Capitalism (as We Know It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997). In their introduction, Gibson-Graham write, “[T]he ‘failure’ to theorize the economy is inevitably associated with certain problematic effects.... Unless the economy is explicitly written out, or, until it is deconstructively or positively rewritten, it will write itself into every text of social theory, in familiar and powerful ways. When it is not overtly theorized, it defines itself as capitalism because it lacks another name” (39). For Gibson-Graham, it is imperative to continue theorizing, defining, and renaming economic systems so that we do not normalize capitalism as Capitalism. Such acts would perhaps provide opportunities for “alternate worlds and to liberate the alternative subjectivities they might permit” (97). In dominant discourses, capitalism is rendered as monolithic because it also makes it identifiable, contested, and oppositional, and in doing so, it gives name to practices that only expand the state’s power and its desires to motivate uncomplicated ways of being and immobilizing those who are under the power of its name.



**Chapter One**  
**“I speak flawless, unaccented English”: The Native Speaker and Acoustic Individualism in *The Accidental Asian***

For children of Asian immigrant parents, perhaps the earliest experiences of shame and difference occur around the English language—there is the flushed feeling of witnessing a mother’s negotiations in halting English with a sales clerk; or the task in serving as the translator between a father and a teacher. English registers the strange gaps and hierarchies between parents, children, institutions, and businesses. In Patti Kim’s *A Cab Called Reliable*, the female protagonist Ahn Joo helps her father begin his truck vendor operation parked in the shadows of the Washington Monument, she uses her excellent English and penmanship skills to create signs and assist him on the weekends. Judging her father’s new position in the public realm as humiliating, she narrates, “As I grew tired of counting and correcting my father’s pronunciation errors, I closed my eyes...telling myself he was better off underground, masked by a dark helmet, and welding the ceilings and walls of the Clarendon subway station.”<sup>1</sup> This uneasy visibility of her father’s racial difference and its enunciations are emblematic of his very embodiment as an Asian immigrant that cannot even be resolved in the heart of the nation’s capitol. His labors are suited for the subterranean world below, necessary for the infrastructures that facilitate America’s movement and progress, but away from its view. Ahn Joo’s shame of her father’s racial difference coalesces around his new role in the public realm, and his articulations of English.

In dominant discourses in Asian American cultural politics and activism, the mastery of English is often used to claim Americanness against the charge of foreignness. Asian Americans are a racial group fractured by ethnic histories, its linguistic practices, and cultural traditions, English is central in uniting a panethnic Asian American cultural politics especially

for second-generation communities. At the 1<sup>st</sup> National APIA Spoken Word and Poetry Summit, a three-day gathering which began on July 28, 2001, Asian American poets and writers marched the streets of Seattle with a banner that stated: “I SPEAK ENGLISH.”<sup>2</sup> The protest was organized to criticize the racial profiling of fourteen Asian American youth, who were detained by Seattle police officers for jaywalking. During an interrogation of the teens, officers questioned their ability to speak English, and became symbolic for the collective performance that commenced this first annual gathering of Asian American poets and writers. The goals of the protest and the Summit were addressed as reviving a transformative radicalism within Asian American culture.<sup>3</sup> However, these ideals ironically slipped into alignment with the politics of English-only jingoists. In privileging a message that Asian Americans are legal and cultural citizens, their message concealed the realities that there are “Americans”—citizens and not—who do not speak English, but should still be privy to justice under the state and its laws. And moreover, erased memories of cultural imperialism that subjected populations in the Philippines and in India to recite and practice English under colonial rule, and formalized English as the unofficial standard language. Phrasing investments of justice within these terms of linguistic recognition, making the speaking of English the basis for securing a legitimate national identity as Asian Americans *and* Americans exposes the limitations of Asian American inclusion.

Throughout this dissertation, I examine when Asian American cultural politics aligns their investments in national recognitions and its concerns with visibility and identity, it depends on the suppression of the Asian immigrant. In this chapter, I pay attention to how cultural practices of English become a formative site for Asians in the U.S. to inscribe themselves as Asian Americans and Americans to counter the alienating effects of their racial embodiments. Lisa Lowe writes:

Throughout the twentieth century, the figure of the Asian immigrant has served as a ‘screen,’ a phantasmatic site, on which the nation projects a series

of condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of the national body: the invading multitude, the lascivious seductress, the servile yet treacherous domestic, the automaton whose inhuman efficiency will supersede American ingenuity. Indeed, it is precisely the unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant—geographically, linguistically, and racially at odds with the context of the ‘national’—that has given rise to the necessity of endlessly fixing and repeating such stereotypes. [...] The presence of Asia and Asian peoples that currently impinges on the transgressive and corrupting ‘foreignness’ and continues to make ‘Asians’ an object of the law, the political sphere, as well as national culture.<sup>4</sup>

Elaine Kim writes in her preface to the literary anthology, *Charlie Chan is Dead 2*, “Linguistically and racially odds with the United States’ image of itself, Asians in the United States have traditionally been seen as eternal aliens.”<sup>5</sup> Asian American activists, writers, and artists have used creative practices of English as a way to both illuminate and challenge this screen as “eternal aliens,” and define Asians in the U.S. as domestic subjects of the nation-state as well as a racial minority. Here, I challenge how the articulations of English and its formations of culture are presumed to confer the stability and legibility of identity against the discursive vulnerability or as Lowe describes as “the unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant.”

Historically, Asian American activism has expressed their politics through cultural practices.<sup>6</sup> Scholarship in Asian American literature focuses their studies through the interrogations of Frank Chin and the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*, this chapter takes those analytical readings towards Eric Liu’s *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*<sup>7</sup>, an Asian American text with a very different political stance. Published in 1998, *Accidental Asian* tracks the cultural and economic assimilation of Eric Liu as a subject of American liberalism and patriotism. A product of Ivy League education, Liu made up the ranks in the political world starting as an intern with Senator Patrick Moynihan, the politician and sociologist most well-known for his studies on American ethnicity (*Beyond the Melting Pot*, 1963) and the black family (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 1965) and continued his political career by becoming the youngest speechwriter for former President Bill Clinton. The memoir forgoes the glimmering stories of growing up as a racial minority in America—almost feeling guilty for not being able

to “offer a more dramatic tale, a searing incident of racism that sent me into deep, self-abnegating alienation” (46). Instead, his narrative of ascendance from suburban ennui into the privileged circles of American society argues for the unfettered imagination of the individual.

Liu’s post-racial politics are founded on his contention that Asian Americans as a racial group, lack a cultural core, ethnic origin, unified language, and shared history. The people subject to its designation are never adequately reflected by its category, rendering it unrepresentable by the people. He notes on the conundrum of a category as a site of representation, writing:

Asian Americans belong not to a race so much as to a confederation, a big yellow-and-brown tent that covers a panoply of interests. And while those interests converge usefully on some points—antidiscrimination, open immigration—they diverge on many others. This is a ‘community,’ after all, that consists of ten million people of a few dozen ethnicities, who have all roots across America and around the globe, whose political beliefs run the ideological gamut, who are welfare mothers and multimillionaires, soldiers and doctors, believers and pagans. It would take an act of selective deafness to hear, in this cacophony, a unitary voice.

Without a unitary voice, however, there can never be maximum leverage in the bargaining for benefits. There can be no singular purpose for the Professional Asian American, no stable niche in the marketplace of identities. It will grow ever harder to speak of ‘the race.’ So be it. What will remain is the incalculable diversity of a great and growing mass of humanity. And there, in the multitudes, will lie a very different kind of power. (73–4)

Liu constructs race as a category aestheticized by color (i.e. “a big yellow-and-brown tent”), but dependent on what is spoken and represented by its members rather than mutually constitutive processes informed by legal, social, and cultural technologies. According to him, “Asian American” is cacophonous, reverberating with diverging politics and interests, and it is under these logics that he predicts a different kind of racial future for Asians in the U.S.: the racial chorus must be in concert otherwise its voices slowly become quieted by an “incalculable diversity...of humanity.”

Liu privileges a post-racial narrative of abstract citizenship and its individualism that invests in examining the limits of a politics dependent on race. Assimilation into normative

society grants racial emancipation through economic uplift and bourgeois cultural norms. He contends his autobiography is evidence of a greater phenomenon of upwardly mobile Asian Americans who are moving into middle-class suburbs and entering professional worlds. They are marrying outside their race, and participating in the economic and social ascendance of Asian Americans into “humanity.” He in turn frames Asian American identity as a site of political consciousness and social belonging that is deliberately sustained by Asian American activists, who wish to maintain their positions as racial minorities in the American imagination. Liu signals this change in Asian American racial formations as a moment to embrace one’s identity as an American and as an individual—to join humanity—but in doing so, he is continually drawn to and haunted by the reflection of his own face.

Like the many other inevitable contradictions of Liu’s logics around race, ethnicity, and national belonging, he touts his divestments of a sacred ethnic culture and the didactic moral and political implications of race. At the same time, it is precisely his racial and ethnic difference that he uses to substantiate his post-identity thesis. Emerging from the 1980s culture wars are books usually by men of color who search their ethnic or racial soul only to “reaffirm [their] faith in America.”<sup>8</sup> These memoirs, aptly described by Jeff Chang as “The Race Confessional,” were borne from and respond to 1970s cultural nationalism, sharing an ideological style in their rhetorics. Writers such as Richard Rodriguez and Shelby Steele, narrate their discovery of the liberating tenets of universal individualism against the personal politics of group identity or, more derisively, “activist identity.”<sup>9</sup> Their books respond to the era of institutionalized multiculturalism and political correctness by voicing what they deem as the provocative reality of racial possibility rather than racial oppression, providing a prognosis on how to navigate the particularities of difference—racial, gender, and sexual—to purchase their individualism. For Liu and Rodriguez, who are from immigrant families, this identity is

acquired foremost through the acquisition of English language. Liu describing the ways he is “white” profoundly reflects this in a list:

I have been there as something other than an attendant.  
 I have the ambition to return.  
 I am a producer of the culture.  
 I expect my voice to be heard.  
 I speak flawless, unaccented English. (34)

Central to these refrains is his English, but especially what his articulations of English have acquired him. His identifications as a native speaker, and his contributions to *the* culture ascribe himself are symbols of his embodiments of America’s “omnicultural” (not multicultural or bicultural) ideals.

In my analysis of Liu, I interrogate his efforts to render himself as an ideal American depends not upon the legality of his U.S. citizenship, but importantly, a narrative that embeds himself as part of and representing and reproducing its bourgeois values, and its knowledge, culture, and politics as a “native speaker.” Lisa Lowe writes, “It is through the terrain of national culture that the individual subject politically formed as the American citizen” (2) and “becomes, acts, and speaks itself as ‘American’” (3). Alternately, she argues, it is also through culture that critical silences, fissures, and artifacts that coalesce around difference always exceed and negate the terms of those disciplinary formations of identity and belonging that are corollary to the U.S. nation-state. Following this insight, I argue Liu’s identifications as a native speaker, which is used to privilege the acoustic terms of his citizenship puts into relief rather than absolves the particularities of his racial, ethnic, and gender differences. I do not point this out to suggest Liu is delusional in his post-racial politics or that he is wrong in his identifications of American individualism, but rather, I use his text to read how the excesses of his individualism emblemized through his gift of language are in its self a critical mode to examine Asian American cultural politics, but not on the terms he argues (i.e. racial transcendence, ethnic assimilation, and social mobility). Instead, Liu’s memoir is an anxious

meditation of Asian American culture as contingent upon a politics of visibility that cannot be transcended through the sound of one's American voice, or in this case, words.

### I. American Inheritance through English

Identity as a form of recognition and visibility in Asian American cultural politics has depended on transforming the discursive vulnerability of Asian America into a legible formation through practices of writing. Memoirs have a fraught place in Asian American literature as noted through the debates around Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.<sup>10</sup> But before their provocative assessments of Kingston, the editors of the landmark collection of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1973) initially targeted their incendiary critiques of Asian American autobiography<sup>11</sup> to writers who authored formations of successful assimilation such as Francis L. K. Hsu.<sup>12</sup> They write, "Hsu's work may or may not give us insight into the mind of the first-generation upper-middle-class Chinese immigrant scholar, but in terms of the native Chinese American sensibility, we can only note that...his vision of Chinese America reinforces white racist stereotypes and falls short of the vision Malcolm X and other blacks had for their 'minority.'"<sup>13</sup> Like *Aiiieeeee!* editors' critiques of Hsu and other "Americanized Chinese," the flogging of Liu and his book by Asian American activists as "being totally co-opted by the white mainstream" and "pro-assimilation" reflects the policing of ideological boundaries around Asian American cultural politics.<sup>14</sup>

The critiques of *Aiiieeeee!* and Asian American activists against writers such as Hsu and Liu conjure two conflicting figures at the heart of Asian American racial formations, its representational politics and cultural practices: the economically privileged, educated professional often represented as the *like*-white model minority, and its inverse, the radical racial minority activist. While these figures are often represented as diametrically opposed in Asian American studies and cultural politics, I see significance in understanding them as mutually constitutive to reconsider how binaristic constructs of minority and majority are

aligned with notions of black/white, underclass/upperclass, and translate towards a politics that pits the domestic versus transnational/international. These differences elide the complex materializations of racial subjectivity, Asian ethnicity, and national belonging. As suggested earlier, English language is an important signifier of Americanness for Asian Americans. At the same time, authorizations of English do not easily transcend racial difference in its articulations nor does it become reflective of desired affiliations.

Whereas academic scholarship and popular opinions point their criticism towards the limits of Liu's post-ethnic and post-racial frameworks, I reread his memoir to emphasize that the narrative and its teleological authorization of his American citizenship and its bourgeois, liberal individualism is composed by the material, historical, and cultural implications of his racialized ethnic subjectivity that he disavows. I see his racial and ethnic difference is contingent to his economic and social success in America. In his acknowledgements of this American birthright from his parents, notably his father, it tracks an accumulation of economic privilege, bourgeois values, and social mobility as constituted by his racial difference and ethnic history. At the same time, economic and social success do not necessarily grant incorporation into the nation, and it is under this auspice that his narrative of self-formation requires constant management of the intersubjective conditions of the somatic and the psychic to discipline and manage his racial, ethnic, and national embodiments from its fictive, discursive, and material associations with the Asian immigrant, and its attendant formation of Asian American identity.

*The Accidental Asian* opens with a son's investigation of a father's past to comprehend his ethnic birthright. He begins his search with a book compiled by old friends from China and Taiwan memorializing his father's life. Examining the letters and notes, he finds himself partially literate and deciphering the Chinese ideographs is a laborious and elusive endeavor. He finds relief in the pictures and their immediate transparency, writing, "It's through these that I'll read the book every so often, searching the scenes for new revelations. That's partly



because the photographs are so wonderful, soft black-and-white images of an innocence beyond articulation. But it's also, frankly because I do not understand the text" (5). The writing about his father's life in China and Taiwan eludes comprehension, but the images are intelligible even transcending language. Yet, when the photographs are translated back to a language of words, it becomes a "post-impressionist work, late Cézanne, rather than a work of realist precision. [...] [M]ore like an *unfinished* Cézanne" (7). He continues, "The scraps of knowledge I have of my father's pre-American life come from letters he wrote, from my mother's secondhand memories, from family lore. They aren't random fragments, exactly. But they aren't full-fledged stories either. They're more like scenes, symbolic images that can be arranged in rough sequence yet still resist narration" (7). These memories and writings like the memorial book are inscrutable, escaping conventional aesthetics and narrative teleologies, and are notated by Liu in a series of disconnected anecdotal sentences: "Here is some of what I know about my Chinese father: That he was the second of six brothers, born in Nanjing in 1936. That his father was a pilot and a general.... That he fled in the night with his family to Taiwan when Communist forces had advanced too close. [...] That his father's drive taught him how to drive a jeep at age twelve, or maybe thirteen. That his family's cook taught him how to make dumplings" (8).

This archive is limited in providing answers, it is evident that his father was born in China, grew up there until his family fled to Taiwan, but it does not reveal *what* about his father was Chinese. Moreover, it doesn't answer what about his own Chineseness is original to his father's, prompting a quest for Liu to understand the meaning of one's ethnic inheritance. Liu writes:

When Chao-hua Liu came to the United States in 1955, at the age of eighteen, he was Chinese. When he died thirty-six years later, he was, I'd say, something other than Chinese. [...] But what, ultimately, does all this mean? Where does this Chineseness reside? In the word? In the deed? In what is learned—or what is already known? And how is it passed from one generation to the next? Some

of the answers lie, I know, in a book I am still unable to read. But there are other answers, I suspect, in a book I must now begin to write (7).

His attempts to render such answers in the text already in front of him are difficult, but even more so, when the book depicts the father's life from a distant past and in a distant place. The imperative to write is a contemplation to locate his Chineseness to solve this "ignorance of self."<sup>15</sup> We might assume that the injunction to write inspires a desire to render the abstraction of his father's life in China into realist portraiture. Instead, Liu is hindered by his role as an "essayist" and his aspirations to provide truth and authenticity. He states if he were a "fiction writer," he "could manipulate these scenes a hundred different ways," (9) and as an essayist, he still comes close to tampering with these memories, endowing a particular "significance to the scenes in a way that reveals as much about my own yearnings as it does about my father" (9). Liu descends into a hyperarticulate, existential crisis in attempting to authenticate his origins against the potential dangers of the fictive, and concludes that his father's Chineseness might be distinguished from its stereotypical connotations or heroic manipulations, and become "more apparent in the context...of America" (11).

In putting his father's ethnic difference in the context of America, Liu foments for himself a story of an American inheritance rather than mere ethnic assimilation. His American individualism is not dramatized as an Oedipal appeal often racialized as intergenerational conflicts. Instead, he makes a compelling point: that parents are also subjects and participants of assimilation, he writes, "In search of narrative tension, we let ourselves forget that the first generation's life as a mere chrysalis, an interlude between the larval existence of the homeland and the fully formed Americanness of the second generation. But the truth is that the father can sometimes become his own form of butterfly" (14).

In relationship to the futile task of interpreting his father's livelihood in China, his parent's life in America is "easier...to conjure up than their years in China and Taiwan" (13). For one, "There are more photographs, for one thing, more anecdotes to help sharpen my

impressions. There are familiar names and places too.... But more than all that, there is the familiar idiom of progress—the steady sense of climbing, and climbing higher; of forgetting, and forgetting more” (13–4). Liu relishes in describing his father’s life in America, and the dramatic shift is felt in the effusive sentimental tenor of his writing. He recalls photographs depicting his parents as an American ideal: a studious and aristocratic picture of his father at desk strikes comparison to a 1890s daguerreotype of a male student he once saw at Yale. In juxtaposing them, his father becomes “Not so quite Chinese,” as their studious pose announce: “*We are Serious Young Men...and we are preparing for the Future*” (12, author’s emphasis). A description of his parents’ wedding in an American church fosters a sense of pride as he envisions the scene: “[T]here were no traditional Chinese rituals; no ancestor worship or kowtowing or burning of incense. They spoke their vows in English. The bride wore white, the groom a rented black tuxedo” (13). Following Liu’s logics, China and Taiwan (and even Chinatown) are places of temporal abstraction, “an unfinished post-impressionist painting,” but America is the temporal threshold of progress that marches his parents’ story forward. This is, of course, a familiar story of wayward immigrants arriving to the shores of America, ready to be unanchored of their ethnic past.

The memoir imagines his racial emancipation as a transgenerational project of American individualism. At the same time, his story illustrates how race, gender, and ethnicity are always requisite to substantiating narratives of national inclusion. Lisa Lowe writes even Asian American novels that closely follow the criteria of the *Bildungsroman* notes the contingencies between the novel and historical narrative by “express[ing] a contradiction between the demand for a univocal developmental narrative and the historical specificities of racialization, ghettoization, violence, and labor exploitation.”<sup>16</sup> In following her observations, Liu, like many Asian Americans, positions himself an ideal citizen-subject that has transcended race because its experience is often conflated with “ghettoization, violence, and labor

exploitation.” In this respect, I read his text as illustrative of a successful integration into America’s ideals, but interrogate how those “most interesting conflicts and indeterminacies within the text” (45) surface differently.

In recounting his transgenerational inheritance of America, Liu exposes a small detail. He reveals his parents’ immigration was driven by a penchant for American popular culture and desires for “the more laissez-faire stance of this country” (36). For Liu, the point is to represent his parents’ aspirations for immigration as validating his resilient loyalty to American exceptionalism, but it also highlights hybrid transactions of ideas and cultures that constitute both notions of America and China/Taiwan. This generates two competing narratives of Americanization and assimilation. The one that he prominently scripts as his Americanization describes his father’s assimilation through his English language skills, his parents’ quintessentially white wedding, and his father’s refusal to be seen as a “victim” (i.e. raced) to rise through the ranks at IBM on his own merits. In re-mining his narrative, we can piece another narrative from this archive: Liu describes his parents’ affinity for Western ideals and knowledges that preceded their arrival into the U.S., his father’s English lessons in Taiwan, and his mother’s appreciation for American popular culture. This coupled by what we can glean as his parents’ economic and social privilege—his paternal grandfather was a general, and his father’s upbringing with cooks and drivers, his mother’s father traveled to the U.S., and their legal entry into the U.S. as students during the Cold War era—are all significant artifacts of a bourgeois life in China as well as the spectral presence of Western cultural imperialism as central to such aspirations. Liu’s identifications to America are an extension of his parents’ bourgeois upbringing in China and Taiwan combined with those forgotten histories of Western presence in Asia that attributed his parent’s entrée into the U.S.—at least his father’s—under America’s new immigration laws. His parents’ self-sufficiency and hard work to achieve their place in the suburbs are constituted by transnational imaginations of culture, politics, and

American dreams are constituted by mutual flows of immigration, militarism, colonialism, and imperialism.

These historical excesses wrinkle Liu's ironed out telos of American individualism and expose their racial and ethnic difference as central to his stories. Lowe explains that the transactions of the private for the universal that grant citizenship operate differently for non-white racial subjects. Lowe writes, "[F]or Asians within the history of the United States [...] political emancipation' through citizenship is never an operation confined to the negation of individual 'private' particulars; it requires the negation of a history of social relations that publicly racialized groups, and successively constituted those groups as 'nonwhites ineligible for citizenship. [...] It requires acceding to a political fiction of equal rights that is generated through the denial of history...."<sup>17</sup> While Liu's history portrays the promise of racial inclusion, we also see how that is accompanied and conditioned by projects of racial exclusion. For Liu, these differences require aestheticizing his parents as illustrative of a nostalgic Americana through photographs, but in examining them he is aware of the limitations of their visage in reflecting them as such. Conjuring an image of his "black-haired" parents on their honeymoon, he notes how the "average citizen in rural Michigan" probably saw them as "foreigners," but "To me, they look heartbreakingly American" (13). Under these irreconcilable terms, Liu turns to language as the privileged site to reflect and embody his national identity.

The memoir's subtitle and one of its chapters, "Notes of a Native Speaker," riffs from James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," but unlike Baldwin's self-description as a "native son," Liu's citizenship is accorded from a conflicted history of Asian immigration. His self-designation as a "native speaker" attempts to absolve these "footnoted histories" to characterize himself as ontic to the domestic space and its ideals. John Willinsky writes how native speakers are constructed as "the only reliable informants of the language" and "are presumed to have a right to contribute to the growth of the language, to open metaphorical

spaces, create new diction, and unearth new meanings through their work on the page. Native speakers use an English that holds hope for universal and global communication through their redoubtable standard. At the same time, they are capable of preserving the language and the culture that stands behind it.”<sup>18</sup> For Liu, central to his identity as a “native speaker” is the story of his father’s English.<sup>19</sup>

If the transgenerational transmission of race and ethnicity challenges Liu’s individualism, his father’s faculty of English is represented as his patrilineal linguistic inheritance to America. Liu describes his command of language as “spoke[n]...with relish, as if he owned it,” marking him as exceptional to “other Chinese immigrants... [who] spoke English as if it was Chinese.” He recalls in pleasure these scenes: witnessing his father wield his authoritative and masculine expression of English—assertive in dealings with mechanics or salesmen or the convivial joking with “Jim, Gil, Jack, and the other big white guys” (23). His English was not timid or deferential like the “other Chinese,” but jocular and confident. Liu’s father’s “metamorphosis” as American is evident in his fluent English, which is inversely matched to Liu’s tentative Chinese. Yet, he appraises what is gained in such exchanges:

When I contrast my father’s possession of English with my forfeiture of Chinese, I feel like something of a fool: as if I had squandered an inheritance and not even realized its magnitude until I was left with only spare change. Yet I know that in a fundamental way it was my father’s possession of English that had made possible my forfeiture of Chinese. You could say, indeed, that I merely completed his assimilation. He might have preferred deep down that I be literate in his first language. But he preferred above all that I have unimpeded access to every avenue of American life. So long as I appeared to have that, any Chinese I might have was just a bonus.” (20)

A father’s “possession of English” condoned his own “forfeiture of Chinese” grants his inheritance and access to American life. David Li writes, “While disputing the equation between biological lineage and cultural heritage, Liu seems to confirm the importance of language (‘word’) and action (‘deed’) in the continuity of familial identity and its transmission. For him, the missing link of the Chinese language constitutes particular problems of cultural

mediation, since to question the residence of Chineseness also means to question how Chineseness is reproduced.”<sup>20</sup> For Liu, Chineseness is not as a racial embodiment, so much as character, tradition, and heritage—one whose origins require transference through language. He describes this sentiment in its inverse when contemplating his future children’s ethnic inheritance, he writes, “Customs alone are mere symbols, distillations, as distinct from cultural truth as water is from vapor. We will need language also. We will need it centrally. For it is in the sound of the language, the aspirates, the curling of the tongue, the mode of thought that the grammar demands, that this phantom I call Chineseness will truly take form—if it ever will” (185). The loss of language is equivalent to the loss, or as he puts it “dilution,” of his ethnic heritage, and following Liu’s logics, the inheritance of English is central to his American birthright.

In his closing sentiments about his father Liu returns to a familiar mantra that is honed throughout the next six essays that structure his thesis on ethnic assimilation and his politics on race. These feel contradictory to his earlier sentiments about his ethnicity: “When your father, who *was* Chinese, has died, Chineseness seems an irrelevance: an inert container, just one among many, for holding the memories of shared experience” (31, my emphasis), and follows with this final assessment, “When your father has died, you realize this: it is the liquid of memory, not the cup we drink it from, that gives our lives content and reveals our humanity” (31). While earlier, Liu signifies Chineseness as a heritage, a language, something that exists beyond the corporeal, in his conclusion it is reproduced as an embodiment.<sup>21</sup> He refers back to the distinction between the somatic (“your father, who was Chinese,” “the cup”) of an individual, and the contents of their potential humanity (“your father” as cleaved from racial and ethnic difference, “the liquid”). This separation is governed by Liu’s appeals for emancipation from racial embodiment and ethnic culture to conjugate himself as an abstract citizen.

Liu abides by the melting pot model of ethnic assimilation, which he later elaborates upon in a chapter entitled, “The New Jews,” but must reckon with the racial excesses that remain for Asian Americans comparatively to the historic ethnic assimilation of Jews as white. Liu illustrates this through a diagram, where depicts his identities as three nested concentric circles: American—as a universal identity—encompasses the racial, and the ethnic is nested in its interior. In measuring the “worth” of each of these components, Liu concludes ethnicity as “more meaningful” than race as it is “something with an identifiable cultural core,” (79). Ethnicity exists in the most interior subset as an essential meme of heritage, but can also be ascribed with a national inflection as “*Chinese American*.” (But national identity cannot be ascribed with an ethnic identity according to his diagram.) Comparatively to the discursive racial designation, “Asian American,” Liu finds the ethnic as amenable to the progress of individualism, and its celebratory tenors of multiculturalist commodification and consumption. Yet, the “native speaker” is still an embodied subject, and despite his ethnic assimilation, Liu’s racial excesses are in danger of interpellating him otherwise. The public medium of his memoir is a formative venue for Liu to divest his racial body of political, social, and psychic investments to position himself as an abstract-citizen, and bourgeois individual.

In *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*, Patricia P. Chu writes, “Asian American texts do two complementary kinds of ideological work: they claim Americanness for Asian American subjects, and they construct accounts of Asian ethnicity that complicate, even as they support, the primary claim of Americanness by representing Asian Americans as grounded in highly specific ethnic histories in America.”<sup>22</sup> She describes these accounts of Asian ethnicity in Asian American literature as offering a “critical ethnic intelligence” that proves Asian Americans through the writers and characters as American by challenging the integrity of America, and thereby expanding upon the possibility of national inclusion.<sup>23</sup> My reading of *The Accidental Asian* extends upon Chu’s conceit to consider how



practices of writing, and I would explicitly add, its articulations of English especially as cultural producers is a formative mode for ascriptions and representations of national legitimacy that differentiate Asian Americans (or as Liu favors, “Chinese American”) and Americans from the Asian immigrant. In many ways, Liu’s narration of his father’s English is about the loss of their status as immigrants rather than as ethnics. As Patricia Chu and other scholars are apt to note, Asian American cultural nationalists claims to the domestic are through the abjection of the Asian American feminine. Hence, as I will argue here and throughout this project, the anxieties of the feminine are intimately linked to the Asian immigrant. I would assert that Asian American texts complicate the terms of Americanness through ethnic histories that underwrite the particularities of immigration, assimilation, and everyday livelihoods; however, this preoccupation with the achievement of Americanness—even in its altered and complicated reimaginings—is continuously made upon the suppression of the Asian immigrant.

For example, the editors of *Aiiiiiiii!!!!* conceptualize ethnicity and race as mutually constitutive formations in their definitions of Asian American literature and its sensibility. In the introductions of the *Aiiiiiiii!!!!* anthology on Asian American literature, the editors’ rhetorical slippages between the hyphenated ethnic American (i.e. Chinese American, Japanese American) to the hyphenated racial American (i.e. Asian American) point to how the state, institutions, and popular cultures produce knowledges around ethnic differences that delineate specific experiences of being Asian in the U.S. (i.e. Chinese Exclusion, Japanese internment, or U.S. colonialism in the Philippines). Asian American literature, in turn, expresses a collective “sensibility” that portrays the Asian ethnic not as an origin of birth, but inscribes how these livelihoods confront and challenge the disciplinary mandates of identity and difference. The editors write, “Asian-American sensibility is so delicate at this point that the fact of Chinese or Japanese birth is enough to distinguish you from being American-born, in spite of the fact that you may have no actual memories of life in Asia. However, between the writers birth and birth

of the sensibility, we have used the birth of the sensibility as the measure of being an Asian-American” (xiv). As such, ethnicity is contingent upon geopolitical relationships, immigration, and the many related operations that produce Asian American subjectivities. “Asian American literature” emulates this experience as derived from the racial excesses of ethnicity, and borne from livelihoods shaped by exclusion, invisibility, and misrecognition rather than simply by “birth.” At the same time, their approach to ethnicity and its correlations to race are intended to describe a specific political (radical progressive), cultural (Asian American), gendered (masculine), and economic (working-class) speaking and writing subject, which distinguishes literary works by Asian Americans from those who they deem as “Americanized Chinese.” Americanized Chinese, like Liu, are invested in the assimilative possibilities as ethnic subjects and speak, write, and consume from that center. The *Aiiieeee!* editors’ notions of ethnicity and its relationship to race are useful, but similar to Liu, they approach the ethnic as a priori to the racial, and as an original cultural, linguistic, and a/historical meme. Both emphasize the ethnic as the point of arrival towards recognition as a citizen-subject, but importantly, a racial minority citizen-subject. Compared to Liu, for the editors, the ethnic is subsumed under the racial experience for the Asian American. Alternately, the unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant is disruptive to their apprehensions of a cohesive subject formation as individual and/or racial minority. While one may remain a racialized ethnic or a hyphenated American, to remain or be seen as an Asian immigrant is to not have identity, to be invisible, to be unrecognizable, and uncategorized.

Rey Chow describes this understanding of the ethnic, “In its modern usage, designating a kind of cultural condition that is descriptive of all human beings, ethnicity has, to all appearances, shifted from its early, religious significance as a term of exclusion and a clear boundary marker (between Jew and gentile, Christian and heathen) to being a term of inclusion, a term aimed at removing boundaries and at encompassing all and sundry without

discriminating against anybody.”<sup>24</sup> Ethnicity in the contemporary moment is perceived as a category with universal appeal that all people embody or embodied at one point. It assumes an apolitical stance since everyone is ethnic, its difference as a cultural marker is perceived as innate, discrete, and authentic, and can be transcended or lost as we often see in canonical theories of assimilation. She adds:

This hyphenated America is, moreover, future-oriented, always looking ahead to the time when United States will have fully realized its universal ideals—that is, when ethnic particulars, while continuing to exist, no longer really matter (because they have been reduced to the merely picturesque). In other words, even when ethnicity is allowed to play a role in the process, the idealist (or theoretical) construction of the American identity must always disavow its own particularism and the lived antagonisms surrounding ethnicity. For the ideal American, ethnicity is something to be overcome and left in the past.<sup>25</sup>

It is precisely under these logics that Liu privileges the ethnic in order to narrate his assimilation and his Americanness. In this regard, I would contend to state that Chu’s “ethnic intelligence” is actually tangent to the current operations of liberalism as seen through narratives of the melting pot and its related inverse, multiculturalism that dictates Liu’s post-racial nationalism and assimilated subjectivity. The ethnic in both instances are seen as something to be lost and/or commodified as cultural that facilitates the passage towards Americanness and its liberal individualism. Representations of Asian ethnicities are dependent on their economic and social positions as normative, upwardly mobile ethnics. Privileging of the ethnic to facilitate narratives of economic self-sufficiency, but ethnicity for Asian Americans does not completely absolve the signifiers of their racial excesses like for white ethnics and conceal the material inequalities that structure the terms of their inclusion.<sup>26</sup>

Instead, ethnicity, like race, is also a socially constructed, politically inflected, and culturally imagined discursive formation. Ethnicity is not a place of birth as they write in the preface to *Aiiiiieee!!!*, and it also does not authenticate our identity and a history, culture, and as I will elaborate in Chapter 4, family. Second, theorizing Asian American texts through interrogations of the racial and ethnic as complementary lenses of critique demonstrates the

difficult terms of representing Asian American subjectivities as a unified category, medium, and genre. As I described earlier in my re-reading of Liu's assimilation narrative, instead of denying these differences in Asian America, we can read how these material realities challenge a cultural politics that are built around nationalisms and capitalisms that attempt to retire ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, and economic differences. As noted by canonical sociologist Robert Park, even in their assimilated state, "[The Oriental] is still constrained to wear his racial uniform; he cannot, much as he may sometimes like to do, cast aside the mask."<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Liu's successful assimilation into the "mainstream" has shorn him of his political burden of being a racial minority, but we see how his sense of individualism is always at risk of being compromised by the possibility of being recognized and becoming the racial other as the Asian immigrant and "the Asian American identity."

## II. The Acoustic Individual

For Eric Lu, the baggage of race and its associations with the underclass and oppressed can be transcended foremost through social and economic uplift. As noted, in his identity diagram, "race" mediates between the national and the ethnic as an aesthetic, a color inherited by biology, instilled with meaning as a site of denigration by activists. Compared to ethnicity, which is "more meaningful," "something with an identifiable cultural core," and a heritage (79) the racial designation: "Asian American," cannot be celebrated despite efforts to render it an occasion around "pigmentation, hair color, eye shape, and so forth" (78). He argues "Asian American" compared to African American lacks the moral legibility to authorize a legitimate racial politics, which lends it traction as a *racial minority*.<sup>28</sup> What is race but an obtuse idea, as he writes, "race matters mainly because race matters" (65)—a mindless and mechanical parroting effect that in its repetition emphasizes its relevance. In spite of his efforts to portray himself as shedding a racial identity, this repetition, this "acoustic mirror," portrays his privileging of his American voice cannot undo the psychic implications of his somatic.

From Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*, where the protagonist Jack confronts his Jewishness against his blackface to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, where the narrator punishes another Asian girl in the school bathroom, the mirror is a prominent metaphor for gender, ethnic, and racial subjection in popular culture.<sup>29</sup> In transracial adoption narratives, the adoptee looks in the mirror to realize her racial and gender embodiments do not align with her familial and national identifications. Adoption scholar, Kim Park Nelson refers to this as "mirror shock."<sup>30</sup> While we usually think of this mirroring as revealing racial difference at the exterior, scholarship in psychoanalysis considers how racial difference maps itself psychically. In a personal website, Korean adoptee Jodi Herdt writes:

Growing up in a mostly Caucasian community, I tried to fit in, despite the fact I was this 'Asian' girl.... It wasn't that I really wanted to fit in and be like them; it was just all that I knew and observed. After a few years in America, I started to believe that I was one of them, and often thought that when I would look in the mirror I would see a little 'white' girl staring back at me. [...] I knew deep down I was proud of my Korean heritage, but sometimes I felt like I was living a lie.<sup>31</sup>

What is striking me is how Jodi sees a "white' girl staring back," locating her racial difference as an affective cognitive dissonance rather than merely a visual manifestation. For the socially differentiated subject, mirroring renders not only the visual, but also puts into relief the psychic and the acoustic dimensions of difference.

In consideration to Jodi's observations of how the mirror informs multiple and conflicting processes of identification and dissonance, I adapt Kaja Silverman's useful phrase "acoustic mirror" to examine how Eric Liu's individualism depends on his disidentifications from the racial signifiers of his body and the privileging of his masculine American voice as inherited by his father.<sup>32</sup> In psychoanalysis, Lacan's mirror stage is cited as a formative moment of identity formation, but Silverman is mindful of its audible stagings as much as its visual indexes. In her book *The Acoustic Mirror*, Silverman theorizes the mirror as an acoustic and visual threshold of subjectivity to convey how registers of voice as well as the body structure

cinematic representations of women. Sounds are another terrain of managing the feminine as a visible and knowable object to sustain the invisible normativity of (white) masculinity. She writes, “Modern male sexuality would thus seem to be defined less by the body than by the negation of the body. [...] [O]ver the past two centuries, the male subject has increasingly disassociated himself from the visible, attempting thereby to align himself with a symbolic order within which power has become more and more dispersed and dematerial.”<sup>33</sup> The audible is another site of representation to render femininity, and strike her visible. Extending her analysis to account for race, masculinity’s disassociation from the visible terrain is racially different for Asian American men, who are racially castrated, meaning their racial excess produces them as lacking a phallus and its masculine authority. In this regard, Liu’s American voice becomes formative in realigning his masculinity to “a symbolic order with which power has become more and more dispersed and dematerial.”

Like feminist scholarship in psychoanalysis, Lacan's mirror stage through the lens of Asian American cultural studies consider how its frameworks are instructive in examining how the socially differentiated subject develops its formation of self against normative ideals.<sup>34</sup> I am not interested in arguing Liu as misguided in his identifications to a post-racial identity, but instead, examine how he arrives to his formation of (Asian) American individualism when it eludes so many. Through his concept of the mirror stage, Lacan examines the projection and identification of self as a formative moment of subject formation. He illustrates the idea through the scene of the infant, who is held or propped to gaze in the mirror, and in leaning towards its own reflection begins to apprehend itself as “I.”<sup>35</sup> David Eng writes, “For Lacan, the ego and the sense of self does not result from an internal act of enlightened will. Instead, it comes only from the outside in, from the infant’s identification with its external image.”<sup>36</sup> Eng explains that the infant’s continuous lean towards its own reflection is indicative of its desires to become one—“to laminate body and image together.”<sup>37</sup> Eng notes possibilities for unity

occurs through one's identifications to the visual—the one's image and its reflection (i.e. imago), but importantly, its correspondence to the bodily ego to achieve what Silverman, in her other book *The Threshold of the Visible World*, calls the “self-same body,” a “coherent identity—to secure psychic presence, hereness, and ultimately jubilation.”<sup>38</sup>

Self-sameness also depends on the alignment of a third visual transaction—that which props or holds the infant so it can find its reflection. In other words, alignment of the visual and bodily egos cannot be achieved through one's psychic identifications to the imago, but requires the affirmations of the third to provide “social sanction, ratification, and support.”<sup>39</sup> We can also perhaps state that this symbolic third term is also metaphoric for the larger social world where the infant is subject to racial, gendered, and sexual differences that facilitate and impede the possibility for psychic stability and coherent identity through its “sanction, ratification, and support.”<sup>40</sup> Eng's rereading of Lacan and Silverman examines how the self-same body for the non-white racialized body is always deferred because “dominant images of the cultural screen prohibit the psychic production of a lovable bodily ego in which the racialized subject can even provisionally invest.”<sup>41</sup> The non-white racial subject cannot achieve healthy identifications to its reflection or its screens. Instead, it is expected to note itself in comparison to such ideals. The possibility of alignment with the reflected ideal is limited to those who are socially and culturally authorized to see themselves as such.

But what happens when the racially differentiated body is socially sanctioned in its psychic identifications to these idealized representations? Going back to the example of Jodi, we presume her imago of the white girl is apprehended by the continuous encouragement by the social structures—“the Caucasian community” and her adoptive white family—which ratify her imago as a “white girl” “despite the fact [she] was this ‘Asian’ girl.” We can assume that Jodi is not only sanctioned to make psychic identifications to whiteness, but is mandated to do so to cohere with her adoptive family and the nation. Yet, her ambivalent psychic

identifications to its imago are impeded by a bodily ego (“Asian girl”), and its psychic iterations—a “Korean heritage” that exists “deep down.” “Korean heritage” is metaphorical for the material conditions that are dissonant to the representational premise of nation-based citizenship and identity formations.

To see the socially differentiated body as sanctioned to align with the imago is compelling as Liu’s desires to imagine himself and his family as ideal representatives of the nation, but is continually confronted with the limitations of the corporeal. I see Liu’s articulations of English as expressing his national identity to construct himself as an acoustic individual against the phantasmatic site of the Asian immigrant and the Asian American activist. Compared to Jodi, who feels a “Korean heritage” suppressed by the sociocultural mandates that contend for her sameness with her familial and national affiliations, Liu is hampered by the contradictory sociocultural expectations to both represent his racial embodiments and transcend them. Eng’s insights consider how self-sameness for the accidental Asian is not an impossible ideal, but a dangerous ideal. Claims to national identity concede to the specular mandates of the nation, which also can prevent one from incorporation into the nation. For example, Shelby Steele writes when he discovered his sense of individualism against his race:

[I] was struck by a thought that seemed beyond me. [...] What scared me a little at the time was its implication of a separate self with independent thoughts—a distinct self that might distill experience into all sorts of ideas for which I would then be responsible. That feeling of responsibility was my first real experience of myself as an individual—as someone who would have to navigate a separate and unpredictable consciousness through a world I already knew to be often unfair and always tense.<sup>42</sup> (my emphasis)

The experience of individualism for Steele comes from a “*feeling* of responsibility,” which require projecting its psychic identifications away from his black body and its attendant legal, cultural, and political relations (“a world I already knew to be often unfair and always tense”) to



“navigate a separate and unpredictable consciousness.” The body and its signifiers must cleave itself from the psychic.

But compared to Steele, whose blackness is aesthetically constitutive of the national body and its historical narrative of perversity (slavery) and progress (civil rights), Asian American subjectivity is constructed in antagonism and proximity to Asia and America, minority and majority.<sup>43</sup> Language becomes a mode in which to resolve the contradictions of racial difference and national belonging to produce Liu as an ontic national subject. The memoir serves as an apt medium to literalize the psychic identifications of social subjects who refuse their alignment with the expectations of their racial markings (i.e. identity politics). To affirm his national identity and individualism, Liu is a compulsive self-gazer. Referring back to the quote from Lowe at the beginning of this chapter, she writes, “[T]he figure of the Asian immigrant has served as a ‘screen,’ a phantasmatic site, on which the nation projects a series of condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of the national body. [...] [I]t is precisely the unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant—geographically, linguistically, and racially at odds with the context of the ‘national.’”<sup>44</sup> By projecting his racial difference to the “phantasmatic site,” Liu juxtaposes his bodily ego against the “unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant,” but also more importantly, in relationship to the self-sameness of the Asian American activist. In this regard, contrary to critiques of Liu, the sensation of individualism for the accidental Asian is not produced through denials or renouncements of race, but in suspending its psychic identifications from its sociohistoric relations to mark itself in difference to the Asian immigrant, who exists in negation to national identity, and the Asian American activist, who exists in negation to individualism.

In recounting his boyhood, Liu recalls how during a visit to New York City’s Chinatown he formalizes a distinction between his family and himself from the “Chinatown

Chinese.” Initially, this journey to Canal Street to resupply their home of Chinese food and things is perceived as an adventure “from the *colorless* outer suburbs to touch the source, to dip into a pool of *undiluted* Chinese” (my emphasis, 102). Navigating a narrow clean path on the sidewalk, Liu is careful to not “soil [his] shoes in the steam of putrid water” (101) and maintains an interested distance from the “teenage ruffians.” Contact with the natives is initially fascinating, and he has an epiphany while walking through the unintelligible, “noisy” space of Chinatown, observing, “They seemed so familiar and so different, these Chinatown Chinese. Like a reflection distorted just so. Their faces were another brand of Chinese, rougher-hewn. I was fascinated by them. I liked being connected to them. But was it because of what we shared—or what we did not? I began that night to distinguish between my world and theirs” (103). Looking at the “distorted” reflections of the “rougher-hewn” Chinatown faces, he notices how his assimilation has enacted physical changes: his family’s faces are smoother, neater, and cleaner.<sup>45</sup> While noting these differences, among the “blur of Chinese faces” emerges the familiar Po-Po, Liu’s grandmother.

The young Liu’s desire to forge a connection between and distinguish himself from the other Chinese is approached with ethnographic fascination as he leans into this “undiluted pool,” but when the image suddenly corresponds not only physically, but also as family, it causes immediate retreat. Following this strange collision, his family returns to their suburban enclave, Liu attempts to restore his body from the discomfiting mapping of these “rougher” Chinese onto his bodily ego recalling, “It was perhaps later than I’d ever stayed up. Still, before I went to bed, I made myself take a shower” (104). Liu perceives assimilation as challenging the racial similitude of himself and these other Chinese, but such imaginations are rendered moot by his grandmother who his family recognizes from the indistinguishable “blur.”

In understanding that assimilation reshapes one physically, but not racially, Liu notes language as distinguishing himself from the “Chinatown Chinese.” He writes, “[M]ost of these

immigrants lack the skills—particularly, the English skills—to make it beyond Chinatown. They remain in what is basically a closed economy, where Chinese employ and often exploit Chinese, where English is never spoken.... They become trapped” (99).<sup>46</sup> Liu recognizes how these networks of labor are sustained by sociopolitical structure that perceives Chinatown as “not *in* America,” “where fealty to the law matters less than obeisance to ‘Chinese ways’” and “the natives govern themselves” (99). Yes, according to him, the Chinatown Chinese as foremost stifled by their English skills, which contributes to the exploitation of their labor and the lack of freedom. It is under these trapping that they are unable to attain an identity, their “butterfly status.” Instead, they remain larvae unable to fly.

In differentiating himself from the Asian immigrant, Liu’s individualism is challenged by a more dangerous corollary: those who claim Asian American identity, “people quite like me: second-generation, mainstream, in search of something else” (67). Liu’s fluency in the language of “the Asian American identity” allows him to outline its restrictive ideologies. At the same time, he contends there is a fine balance between paranoid anxiety and jubilation of racial identity. He writes, “For while it may be possible to transcend race, *it is not always necessary to try*. And while racial identity is sometimes a shackle, it is not *only* a shackle” (53, author’s emphasis). It is under this judicious ambivalence that he considers the usefulness of Asian American identity, but perceives it as antagonistic and surplus to his Americanness. He sounds a cautious warning of this self-selecting path of separatism, writing, “defers the greatest task of confronting American life” (72)—the possibilities of individualism.<sup>47</sup>

The Asian American identity, or as he calls “The Professional Asian American,” is a kind of identity evangelist, “who chose to become wholeheartedly Asian American: those who believe.” He explains this identity as it relates to himself:

What I am saying is that I identify with the Asian American identity. I understand why it does what it does. It is as if this identity and I were twin siblings, separated at birth but endowed with uncanny foreknowledge of each

other's motives. The problem is, I disagree with it often. [...] The feeling is mutual, I suspect. We react to the same world in very different ways. And yes, I do think of this identity as something that reacts, something almost alive, in the way that a *shadow*, or a *mirror image*—or a conscience—is almost alive. [...] It draws me in, it repulses me. I am ever aware of its presence. There is always part of me that believes I will find deliverance if I merge with this identity. Yet still I hold it at remove. For I fear that in the middle of this swirl, this great human churn, lies emptiness" (57–8).

For the accidental Asian, the self-same body coheres as "*the Asian American identity*" and hinders one towards greater ideals. While the Asian immigrant is in danger of being stuck in the past, the Asian American identity is caught in a tautological, pathologically narcissistic condition of self and identity.

Under this guise, Liu must separate his bodily ego from its potential alignments to "the Asian American identity," which challenges his aspirations for individualism against racial difference. To distinguish himself from the similitude of this imago, Liu screens the latter as external projections: a "twin," "shadow," "mirror image," and more profoundly, "conscience," (57–8), splitting it from the corporeal. It is under this premise that Liu can lean towards this image, writing, "It draws me in," only to add, "it repulses me" (58). These ambivalent psychic identifications guard him from the danger of "merg[ing] with this identity" like those "born-again Asians," whose visual ego and bodily ego have become self-same. Liu notes the jubilant possibilities in the self-same body, its potential in offering "deliverance" and "order"; yet, he chooses to deny the stability and coherence of the self-same Asian American body for a fragmented self, the Asian American individual.<sup>48</sup>

Liu describes the dangerous effects of becoming Hulkishly laminated as Asian American after his appearance on a cable television news network to discuss the controversy surrounding the March 24, 1997 *National Review* illustrated cover with President Bill Clinton, first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Vice President Al Gore in yellowface. The image accompanied an exposé story scrutinizing the Clinton campaign for receiving "foreign" (i.e. China) contributions. Seated in front of the camera, the anchor opens their conversation by

asking, “What about this cover do you find offensive, Eric?” In spite of her address to Liu (i.e. “you” “Eric”), he recognizes the anchor’s hail does not warrant his personal opinion (“juvenile, sophomoric”), but the “answer any self-respecting Asian would give.” He plays the role of “the Asian spokesman” verbatim, but when a thinly-veiled “another Asian American, South Asian” writer from a conservative news magazine, (i.e. Dinesh D’Souza) joins via satellite for the discussion, Liu’s psychic investments towards his character merges in a grotesque alignment of racial identity. He describes the scene:

‘We didn’t think this cover would be particularly controversial,’ I hear this other Asian say. ‘Normal people aren’t offended by it.’

*Normal people?* The more this other Asian talks, the more heated I become in my responses. At first I assume it’s the adrenaline rush of verbal combat. But as he goes on mouthing his disingenuous party line—something like, ‘We would’ve used leprechauns if this scandal was about Irish money’—I become more than just irked, more than angry, until suddenly I realize that I am outraged. I am sending a searing look into my own reflection in the camera as I argue. And I am shouting now: I have raised my voice to defend *my people*.” (61, author’s emphasis)

In this hall of mirrors, Liu’s bodily ego becomes refracted into a series of imagos: a disparaging magazine cover of bucktooth caricatures, “the other Asian,” who is a channeled simulacrum of Liu as well as Liu’s own reflection in the camera. The alliance of these dissonant images facilitates the alignment of his “searing look” as an Asian American with his bodily ego, which is expressed through his voice. After the show, Liu initially experiences pleasure in his self-same body as an Asian American employee shakes his hand, but such jubilant psychic identifications quickly disintegrate into ambivalence and remorse. He becomes troubled by his transformation from playing an activist “because I felt I should” to “merg[ing] completely with [the] role,” “to lose myself in it.”

In deciphering this moment, Liu discerns the coterminous productions of “other people’s expectations and a sense of danger” (62) as central to formations of Asian American identity and its community. We can liken this as an informal conceptualization of the interpellative hail, which is less complicated than Althusser, but offers an understanding of

how Asian American identity is forged through subjections of danger and its affects of threat. In his concluding sentiments of this scene, Liu explains how the sensation of danger elicits racial identification, drawing his bodily ego to this imago, he writes, “[O]nce I perceived the smarmy hypocrisy of this fellow—I heard his intransigent insistence that the fault lay only with whiny, race-peddling Asians like me—I was chilled by the sense that maybe there *is* a danger out there. Maybe it *is* true, as I was then asserting on camera, that what separates insulting caricatures from more troubling forms of anti-Asian sentiment is only a slippery slope” (63). Interpreting Liu’s experience of self-sameness, it is this fellow’s threat to his imago as Asian American activist that causes his bodily ego to retreat its psychic identifications to Asian American identity resulting in coherence. It is under this logic that he concludes Asian American activism is guided by the rationale of “self-defense” to protect their visible presence from racial identifications to pejorative images and its perilous effects. Thus, for Liu, his individualism experiences danger foremost in the realm of the visible as an anxiety of projection and representation (consider how the televised conversation was not about the article, but the cover).

In re-reading Liu’s self-diagnosis of self-sameness, he characterizes his psychic identifications to a racialized identity as prompted by the need to protect the imago. But I would argue that psychic coherence is produced from the inability to distinguish between the imagos and the bodily ego under subjection as well as in the face of the other Asian.<sup>49</sup> In his final remarks, while Liu racially unmarks the “other Asian” as “this fellow,” it is apparent that the one doing the hailing bears significance in our responsive turn. There are two intersecting interpellations of race being produced: the television network, which are corollary to what he refers to as “the pale, powerful,” who cast him as an Asian American spokesman for his racial aesthetic and his American voice, and the “other Asian,” who hails Liu as *abnormal* (“Normal people aren’t offended by it.”) for the same act. It is common to hear stories of non-white

racial subjects experiencing the prospect of danger in being hailed for their race by whites, but in this case, the racial identifications made by this media network affirm not only his racial profile, but also his social standing. On television, he perceives this as a role that he's expected to play for dominant society, his racial difference is a projection for the American public that ratifies his voice as an American ideal. In playing the same role against "another Asian American, South Asian," Liu becomes not a speaker *for* "the community," but as speaking *from* Asian American identity.<sup>50</sup> When the other Asian responds to Liu's eloquent remarks about the cover's racist representation with: "Normal people aren't offended by it." Liu "booms" back, "Somehow, we have gotten to the point where those who protest bias and insensitivity are *demonized* more than those who commit it!" (61, author's emphasis), the other Asian responds, "I'm not demonizing *you*" (61, my emphasis). In recounting this verbal spar, Liu never implicates himself as finding "offense" in the stereotypes, carefully separating himself from "*those* who protest bias," but strangely neither does this other Asian. In this regard, Liu's contention that Asian American identity is borne from "other people's expectation" warrants further interrogation.

In her theorization of Althusser's interpellation, Judith Butler writes the authoritative hail of the law is not what incites the turn towards the voice, but rather the subject already anticipates its call, ready to assume the guilt to be conferred with an identity. She writes:

This turning toward the voice of the law is a sign of a certain desire to be beheld by and perhaps also to behold the face of authority, a visual rendering of an auditory scene—a mirror stage or, perhaps more appropriately, an 'acoustic mirror'—that allows that misrecognition without which the sociality of the subject cannot be achieved. [...] This account appears to imply that social existence, existence as a subject, can be purchased only through a guilty embrace of the law, where guilt guarantees the intervention of the law and, hence, the continuation of the subject's existence.<sup>51</sup>

Liu's identity as an individual is constituted through misrecognitions (or "danger") as the pejorative and dangerous figures of the Asian immigrant and Asian American activist, so his desires to be an individual depend on his identifications towards the very logics of identity that

he finds suspicious. When Liu finds himself produced in negative relation to this “normal,” “other Asian” who strangely, like him, is not an Asian American activist, he finds he must direct his psychic identifications towards the reflection in the camera to constitute his identity.

Under the psychic presence of self-sameness, Liu is a valorized spokesman of the community, but exiting this phase, he experiences remorse and shame in anticipating D’Souza’s perception of him as a “*whiny, race-peddling Asians like me*” (63, my emphasis). Liu’s identity must be drawn through identifications and misrecognitions from a limited field of socially-sanctioned visual images for Asians in the U.S.: *The National Review* cover, his role as an Asian American spokesman against stereotypes, or even the casting of the “other Asian” spokesman in its obverse position. Unlike the whole-hearted Asian Americans, whose identity provides “a certain order to their existence,” Liu is instead “the accidental Asian,” “Someone who has stumbled onto a sense of race; who wonders now what to do with it” (63–4).<sup>52</sup> Liu is correct in noting how race is a politics imbued with meaning. At the same time, according to his logics, Asian American is not a sociohistoric racial formation, but a tautological formation of self and wished into existence by Asian American activists once out of need, and vainly sustained by “those who believe.” Thus, his shame is drawn from his perception that he can represent and *speak* for Asian America, but Asian American identity cannot represent nor ever *speak* for him. Remember, Liu relies on his articulations of English to transcend the specular body to become representative of the nation-state. His psychic identifications are mitigated by his acoustic projections, but when bodily ego aligns with his psychic investments he reverberates as a “righteous, *vocal* Asian American” that is “whiny, race-peddling.”

Butler introduces the “conscience” as a central formation in propelling ideology that precepts the anticipation of the hail through one’s already submission to a guilty charge. Butler writes, “Althusser links the emergence of a consciousness—and a conscience—with the problem of speaking properly. ‘Speaking properly’ appears to be an instance of the ideological



work of skill acquisition, a process central to the formation of the subject.”<sup>53</sup> To take Butler’s reading of Althusser perhaps a bit literally, we might see Liu as characterizing Asian American identity as a “conscience,” as separated from bodily ego to constitute his individualism, we observe this “conscience” is reproduced through his identity as a “native speaker.” (Steele also constructs his “consciousness” of individualism as emerging from the sensation of responsibility, which requires him to exist outside the conditions of his racial embodiments.) According to Butler, our mastery of language is a submission to the ideological demands that constitute identity into discursive legibility. She writes, “To master a set of skills is not simply to accept a set of skills, but to reproduce them in and as one’s own activity; this is not simply an acting according to a set of rules, but the embodying of rules in the course of action, and the reproduction of those rules in embodied rituals of actions.”<sup>54</sup> Liu characterizes his Asian American identity as a performance, a role that he “just plays on TV,” yet his racial difference and his articulations of English are what produce his identity as “native speaker.”

Individualism for the accidental Asian depends on self-policing his psychic identifications to his bodily ego, which results in the self-same, Asian American identity, but also to individualism’s imago, racialized as white heteromascularity. When Liu realizes he has arrived to “the seat of whiteness...the promontory of social privilege,” it fosters a desire to look in a mirror. He writes, “Now I want desperately to see my face, to see what time has marked and what it has erased. But I can find no mirror except the people who surround me. And they are mainly pale, powerful” (38). His desire to examine its physical toll considers its potential in corporeal transformation—remember how the young Eric distinguishes himself from the “rougher-hewn Chinese.” But unable to find a mirror, he gazes at the pale and powerful faces around him.

This screen is reflective of Liu’s social achievements, and in many ways, affirms his psychic identifications to American exceptionalism and individualism. But Liu is not white, and

is careful to note as much, writing, “I do not want to be white. I only want to be integrated. When I identify myself among white people who wield economic and political power, it is not for their whiteness but for their power” (55). This psychic tension does not facilitate divestments of whiteness and its individualism and mobility, but attempts to characterize individualism as a raceless endeavor. Liu does not identify with whites, but their apostrophized power. To identify with hegemonic white heteronormative representations of individualism would only affirm its racist construct, and his exclusion from its realm. Despite such disclaimers, Liu reiterates whiteness as the racial and cultural standard and, thus, making blackness its obverse denigrated other.

Like Jodi, let’s say this imago in spite of its racial difference is socially sanctioned to eclipse his bodily ego, but even this brief moment of self-sameness Liu does not express ecstasy or jubilation. Instead, he is contemplative of his journey, careful to look back to see how far he’s arrived. He returns to his tale of American inheritance, writing, “By coming to America, my parents made themselves into citizens of a new country. By traveling the trajectory of an assimilationist, so did I” (38). His parents’ citizenship and Americanness is achieved in this story as ethnic immigrants. The subsequent loss of that immigrant status is facilitated not only through citizenship, but also by embracing its culture of progress. Unable to claim status as an ethnic immigrant, Liu’s citizenship and its successes are gained not through the assimilative loss of ethnicity and inclusion into the privileged racial categories like white ethnics, but are reflected through his adherence to cultural norms and its desires for social mobility, economic privilege, and vocal authority. The becoming of “I” rather than just citizen.<sup>55</sup> Again, to take Butler literally, “For the ‘I’ to launch its critique, it must first understand that the ‘I’ itself is dependent upon its complicitous desire for the law for the possibility of its own existence.”<sup>56</sup> In this sense, while Liu’s memoir operates as an

interrogation of “Asian America” as a nation-based formation of identity and culture, in doing so, he challenges his own incorporation as the member of the U.S. nation-state.

This is why he does not experience joy in looking at those pale, powerful faces, it does not illuminate his achievements as much as confirms the inevitability of his racial difference, which is contingent to his achievements. Hence, self-sameness might be achieved, but the psychic stability and presence it accords is elusive. In gaining membership to “exclusive institutions,” “the inner-sanctums of political power,” the reflection of the pale and the powerful may provide jubilant identifications perhaps through an “acoustic mirror,” but Liu must always reckon with the specularity of being a “native speaker.”<sup>57</sup>

David Leiwei Li writes in his compelling and comprehensive reading of the competing discourses of ascriptive and acquisitional assimilations in Liu’s memoir, despite achieving “ascriptive assimilation,” which grants Liu mobility and access accorded with economic privilege and political clout, but does not access him its whiteness attendant to “acquisitional assimilation.” In reading the final scenes of the memoir from a chapter called “Blood Vows,” Liu’s marriage to a white, Jewish southern woman portrays America’s progress and the future of such possibilities. Li explains, “In the same manner that his forfeiture of Chinese language is enabled by his father’s command of English, his children’s American authenticity will be enabled by his miscegenation, for assimilation in culture without assimilation in blood is apparently an incomplete Americanization” (128). The promise of such a future is illustrated by two wedding gifts bestowed by their respective mothers. Liu’s mother gives him and his betrothed, Carroll, an album with photographs of his family, leaving “the last several pages left,” Liu notes, “She has made a document of my history” (202). Carroll’s mother inaugurates their marriage with a poem, which closes the memoir with its final line: “*Go. Make up your own story*” (203, author’s emphasis). Patricia Chu writes, “[M]arriage plots are central often central to gender construction in traditional bildungsromane,” but are often absent in Asian American

narratives. Marriage often appears at the end of these narratives portraying the closure of one's self-formation and especially for ethnic immigrants it is representative of the completion of their Americanization, and "the individual's reconciliation with the social order."<sup>58</sup> Likewise, Liu's marriage at the end of his memoir signals a promise of Americanization, but more "poignantly" a reproductive future that is racially mixed—the possibilities of this miscegenated future. But until that future arrives, until that photograph has been made available, Liu must trek towards this future, not with his mother's photographs, which are "history," but with words that promise the making of his own story.

### III. The Reflective Voice, Reflecting Culture

The "Race Confessional" narratives by writers such as Eric Liu, Richard Rodriguez or even Dinesh D'Souza are not different from the militant voices of Frank Chin and the male editors of *Aiiieeeee!*. Their visions of what constitutes as authentic and ideal subjects of the nation veer into different directions, but both Liu and Chin inscribe their national identities as productions of American culture, and in turn, as cultural producers of English. If Asians in the U.S. elude national recognitions through their racial embodiments, Chin and Liu argue culture and its articulations of English are vital in verifying Asians in the U.S. as American. In this respect, it interesting and important to interrogate how his post-racial politics intimate the rhetorics of Asian American cultural nationalism to challenge how both constructs of identity rely on notions of culture as a stabilizing force to reproduce the real against the fictives of the Asian immigrant.

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed how Liu sees the heterogeneous formation of Asian America as a site of cacophonous voices unable to join as a chorus. Instead of organizing this "confederation" into unity, he suggests that it should organically dissipate into humanity. Yet, Liu is continually confronted by those Asian Americans—"The Professional Asian American"—who are unwilling to let go of their "Asianness." The

Professional Asian American causes him and other people to be homogenized under its designation. It is under this premise that his memoir focuses on interrogating the limitations of the category as a political, cultural, and social rubric as being unrepresentable. This sentiment is profound in the contemporary moment where the cultural politics of neoliberalism have privileged representation and visibility as the index of social equity. Compared to Liu who notes too little ground is shared in the category, in Asian American cultural politics, attempts to represent the category and its demographic, political, and ethnic diversity results in what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls a “crisis of representation” that “threatens the ability of Asian America to represent itself in a unified fashion.”<sup>59</sup> Here, the disciplinary mandates to unify also trouble the terms of representation. Nguyen argues that representational and categorical unity in the contemporary moment has transformed Asian American activist politics from a platform of anticapitalist critiques of labor and politics that emerged in the 1960s and 70s to a politics invested in regulating Asian Americans as radical subjects. Nguyen argues how “crisis of representation” challenges contemporary formations of Asian American activism. Rather than approaching this “crisis of representation” as unproductive of politics, we use this “crisis of representation” as unfolding a critique around the limitations of representation.

In the early 1970s, Frank Chin and the editors of *Aiiieeee!* saw literature to disseminate proper representations of Asian Americans. “Proper” to them was not the good, normal, and well-spoken Americans like Liu, but was an angry, confrontational, misspeaking Asian American. In conjuring such a figure, they defined Asian American culture as a disciplinary construct to tract against the discursive vulnerabilities of Asian American subjectivity symbolized through the figure of the Asian immigrant and its alienating and feminizing effects. For the editors, Asian American identity was to be stabilized through a culture that was particular and reflective of the Asian *American* experience.

Inspired by black cultural nationalism, Frank Chin and the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* dictated what types of representations were appropriate depictions of Asian America. Such representations required a linguistic aesthetic as much as narrative content that would embody this culture and its people. The editors express this sentiment through their editorial choices in their anthology, and in their essay, “An Introduction to Chinese and Japanese American Literature”:<sup>60</sup>

The universality of the belief that correct English is the only language of American truth has made language an instrument of cultural imperialism. The minority experience does not yield itself to accurate or complete expression in the white man’s language. Yet, the minority writer is made to feel morally obligated to write in a language produced by an alien and hostile sensibility. His task, in terms of language alone, is to legitimize his, and by implication his people’s orientation as white...that appeals to whites because it celebrates Asian American self-contempt. Or his task is opposite—to legitimize the language, style, and syntax of his people’s experience...that emerges from an organic familiarity with the experience. (23–24)

*Aiiieeeee!!!!* editors saw the Asian American experience as the point of expression. Their alienation from national identity and its masculinity required transforming the propriety of a language, which could not adequately verbalize their livelihoods as *Asian American*. This vernacular form was critical in imagining an authentic and representative Asian American subject that was distinct from a subject formation articulated through rote English. Daniel Kim explains:

[T]he ‘contestatory’ force—the aesthetic intent—that comprises the essence of the vernacular subjects championed by [Ralph] Ellison and Chin is depicted not only as racially authentic but also as wholly virile. What these writers valorize...is a *masculine* figure who speaks back from the racial margins, whose linguistic prowess lies in his deft capacity to repeat parodically and subversively the languages that constitute the center, none of which he should be able to claim as properly his own. He is defined by a violent and aggressive capacity to incorporate, appropriate, and mangle whatever linguistic materials enter into his verbal domain.<sup>61</sup>

To “ventriloquize” English meant to become mimics, which was akin to being a minstrel or a dummy portraying one’s submission to dominant ideologies. The creation of a vernacular tradition distinguished Asian America’s sociohistorical and political place in the marginal yet

national cultural space, and authorized a distinctly Asian American culture and identity—not like white or like black—that was expressive of its creative potential for radical politics.

Under this premise, the editors saw Asian American culture as a project of recovery, excavation, and invention, and outlined a genealogy of Asian American literature as a politically radical and heteromasculine tradition exemplified by writers like John Okada, Carlos Bulosan, and even female authors such as Hisaye Yamamoto. Their stories narrated the livelihoods of Asians in the U.S. as racialized subjects of American culture, politics, and history, who were shaped by structural and institutional racism, and inscribed a vernacular that formalized a racial aesthetic. Kim writes, “The emphasis that places on the aural and oral dimension of this writing confirms the rhetorical power gained by asserting a given text’s vernacular credentials: for the sound of the vernacular is, at bottom, the sound of a particular aesthetic agency, one that is imagined as racially authentic and that is propelled by a certain aggression.”<sup>62</sup> In their project to define and represent an Asian American literary tradition, they erected an identity that would represent a masculine and radical voice that would revise hegemonic representations.

In following Kim’s insights, we can observe how like Chin, Liu’s identity as a “native speaker” is founded on similar logics that attempt to revise his racial embodiments. Compared to the linguistic style of Chin and the other writers that he admires whose works emulate a vernacular style rather than a “broken English,” Liu’s writing also has a colloquial sensibility, but its articulations remain formal, deliberate, and grammatically correct in its address. Liu’s literary genealogy is properly American, drawing from a range of writers not just Asian American: Walt Whitman, James Baldwin, Gish Jen to Philip Roth. Referring back to the Lowe’s theorization of the canonical novel especially the *Bildungsroman*, the careful constructions of these literary genealogies are requisite to authenticating their identities to the nation.

But Liu is unconvinced there is an Asian American culture and argues that Asians in the U.S. have transcended into a better and more necessary culture through their ethnic assimilation. Liu contends Asian Americans no longer require the social and political formations attendant to categorization as a racial minority, but seems to concede that a “culture” could harness its legitimacy towards new and definitive means. Similar to the efforts of Chin and the editors, Liu writes, “[N]o race can live on threat alone. [...] There must also be an affirmative sensibility, an aesthetic that emerges through the fusing of arts and letters with politics” (70). He cites the now-defunct *A. Magazine: Inside Asian America*, a publication devoted to Asian American culture and politics founded in 1989, as an example of this “aesthetic,” but criticizes *A. Magazine* and its mission “to create, and to be created, by an ‘Ideal Asian’” (70) and its “race-nation”—a willful separation to maintain its particularities from the universality of the U.S. nation-state.<sup>63</sup>

Liu cites *A. Magazine* as an example of an Asian Americanist “aesthetic,” but this “aesthetic” seems to be different from “culture” as he writes, “What’s missing from Asian American culture is culture” (79). He argues:

[Z]en Buddhism, feng shui, karaoke bars? [...] The problem, though, is that these and other forms of culture inherited by Asian Americans are *ethnic* in origin. The folkways are Chinese, for example, not ‘Asian.’ [...] As far as an organically *pan-Asian* culture is concerned, there isn’t much there. [...] As one Asian American activist once said tellingly, ‘I think Asian American culture is anything that Asian Americans are doing. Just that.’ (79).<sup>64</sup>

The activist’s slack response is “telling” of Asian America’s impoverishment as an identity, its “new, synthetic, made-in-the-U.S.A.” quality highlighting its industrial, ready-made plasticity. It is under this logic he claims Asian American identity lacks a “cultural core” that girds meaning to ethnicity like Vietnamese and Korean. This is emphasized when he compares Asian American to other racial groups like blacks, Latinos, or even, Jews, who share a historical, linguistic, and/or religious context that hems their unity. Instead, Asian Americans have had a “collective action and shared experience [...] for only two or three decades” writing, “While



the Asian American identity shares with these other identities the bones of collective victimization, it does not have their flesh of cultural content” (80).

It is clear that Liu imparts us with contradictory definitions of “culture,” which are embedded in racialized logics.<sup>65</sup> For example, culture for racial minorities and American ethnics in the U.S. depend on a cultural “heritage” and historic legacy that should be longer than two decades. Comparatively, “America is exceptional not only because it provides due process and a setting for free cultural expression but also because it *synthesizes* the many cultures it welcomes” (128, my emphasis). He assesses that one “becomes Asian American,” through induction into its “memory of wounds” or “bones of collective victimization,” but it is precisely through this limited and particular definition that anticipates the extinction of racial identity for Asian Americans as a group,<sup>66</sup> whose seams of collectivity are bared by loose stitches of memory and history, and prompts him to ask, “Is there anything more to my ‘APA-ness?’” (79). Liu’s premise for such dismissals become evident when he makes the following statement, “I wish for a society that treats race as an option, the way white people today are able to enjoy ethnicity as an option. As something cost-free, neutral, fluid” (65). Unlike white ethnics, for Asians in the U.S., assimilation of the ethnic not only surfaces as commodified cultural surplus, but also is aestheticized in its racial excesses. Liu prominently acknowledges and is confronted with this persistence of race.

I read his differentiation of an Asian Americanist culture from an aesthetic guided by his appeals that I cited earlier in this chapter for us to drink “the liquid...that gives our lives content and reveals our humanity” over the “cup we drink from.” To this extent, his notion of “Asian American aesthetic” as the institutionalization and commodification of “identity,” which leads to its visibility and representational status. For Liu, this “aesthetic” is insufficient in reflecting its constitutive ethnic, political, cultural, and linguistic particularities, and instead proposes the construct of an “ideal Asian.”<sup>67</sup> Relating Liu’s “aesthetic” to Daniel Kim’s analysis

of Frank Chin's vernacular literary form, which would authorize an Asian American "aesthetic" representative of a racialized heteromascularity, Chin pursues the very thing that Liu amply refutes and also embraces towards different ends—a racial particularity marked and reproduced by the nation as an "aural/oral" subject. But for Liu, it is the racial aesthetic—in its somatic and "aural/oral" forms that he resists. In fact, his articulations of English are to transcend the social intents of his racial embodiment rather than express it.

In reading Liu's critique of Asian American identity as directed towards its institutionalization and commodification and the limitations of its representational status, we might consider how critiques directed towards Liu as a "sell-out" portray how Asian American activists are wary of having Liu represent "Asian America." If Chin and his brethren critique America and its national culture as insufficient in reflecting "Asian American," Liu's book is a critique of "Asian America" as insufficient in reflecting himself. In this regard, how can we mobilize these sentiments towards a theorization of Asian American culture and its literatures as unrepresentable of its institutional category and also the nation?

Liu's critique and ambivalence of Asian American identity is important to acknowledge. In his critique about the limitations of Asian American identity, he, in turn, illustrates the limitations of his own desires to be recognized as American. Liu contends that it is Asian American Professionals that insist upon the label of "Asian American" as a social, political, and cultural category, and contribute to the institutionalization and commodification of the category. In writing about the transformation of "Asian American" from one mobilized by radical activism to state-sponsored category, he wryly notes, "In the eyes of the feds, all Asians now looked alike. But this was a *good* thing" (68). The laws that appraise Liu as "Asian American" cannot represent his economic privilege, social mobility, or assimilated status nor ensure those particularities are reconciled, "synthesized," and represented through his national identity as American. To undo those laws that designate him as Asian American are the same

laws that issues his national identity. Or as Judith Butler states in a more eloquent fashion, “One cannot criticize too far the very terms by which one’s existence is secured” (25).

While Liu and I come to very different conclusions about what Asian American means, his ambivalence is a lucrative site of a critique on identity, and culture as its reflection. In this sense, I turn to Asian American cultural practices as a site that reckons with the ambivalences around racial meaning, and texts that attempt to resist racial identification such as Liu’s book, a formative way to understand the limits of rhetorics that organize around the politics of visibility and invisibility, recognitions as the majority and minority that normally structure “minority” politics. Both of these politics rely on the authenticating discourses of the “real” and the representative, which are vexed ways to define how and why Asian bodies are to appear. Rather than recovering an Asian American “cultural core,” the heterogeneity of Asian American racial formations contributes to a cultural practice that locates and generates vital knowledges that illuminate the tense paradoxes around the ethnic, racial, and national. In other words, “Asian American cultural production” presumes to be a representation of Asian American identity. For example, Asian American literary anthologies, film festivals, or magazines are often seen as describing its content as well as its audience. Liu’s work like many Asian American cultural practices, if we theorize it as such, are drawn by the limitations of Asian American as a descriptive racial and ethnic orientation with its political and cultural associations. Instead of reiterating the racial and ethnic as representative of identity, culture and its politics, which require demarcating neat definitions and ideals, we can also read it as also a negation of such assumptions that improvise new ways to theorize its ambivalent refractions and attempts to challenge identity as unity, homogeneity, and universality. In highlighting the inventive fictions of Asian American culture, we can subsequently explore how Asian American subjectivities forge critiques that confront and challenge the limitations of hegemonic formations of identity.

If Liu perceives acts of writing and its productions of culture as authenticating self in relation to the nation, in my next chapter, I turn to a reading of *A Cab Called Reliable*, to propose how articulations of English and practices of writing cannot authenticate identity. While Liu seems to convey how the universalism of English proffers a lingua franca requisite for privilege and access, Kim's protagonist is confounded by the limitations of English in translating the particularities of knowledges and experiences. In this sense, English as a linguistic apparatus capable of conveying the universality of humanity is exposed as translation not only of language, but experiences, ideas, and stories that take on varying positions of significance and power.

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<sup>1</sup> Patti Kim, *A Cab Called Reliable*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 77–78.

<sup>2</sup> See Vincent Law, "Passing the Word: At a Seattle summit, poets meet to transform Asian America and themselves," *A. Magazine*, November 20, 2001, 68, ProQuest.

<sup>3</sup> *1<sup>st</sup> National APLA Spoken Word & Poetry Summit 2001*, accessed March 24, 2008, <http://www.thecollectivechicago.org/summit2001/schedule.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: on Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 18–19.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Kim, preface to *Charlie Chan is Dead 2: At Home in the World*, ed. Jessica Hagedorn (New York: Penguin, 2004), xiii.

<sup>6</sup> Glenn Omatsu writes, "But we would be wrong to describe this transformation of our communities as solely 'political'—at least as our society narrowly defines the term today. The transformation also involved a cultural vitality that opened new ways of viewing the world. Unlike today—where Asian American communities categories 'culture' and 'politics' into different spheres of professional activity—in the late 1960s they did not divide them so rigidly or hierarchically. Writers, artists, and musicians were 'cultural workers' usually closely associated with communities, and saw their work as 'serving the people' (62). In "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Chang, "Up Identity Creek," *Colorlines*, no. 3, winter 1999, accessed November 17, 2007, [http://colorlines.com/archives/1998/12/up\\_identity\\_creek.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/1998/12/up_identity_creek.html).

This chapter is inspired by Chang's analytical comparison of Eric Liu and Frank Chin. Notably, in conjunction with "the race confessional" we can see a similar market of books having increasing popularity, which is the "race realized" books where upon seemingly white subjects realize the impurity of their whiteness through hypodescent laws or white subjects who grew up in black segregated neighborhoods or Africa. These books such as *Life on the Colorline* by Gregory Hines Williams or the plays and performances by Danny Hoch reveal the susceptibility of blackness and whiteness both biologically, but also culturally.

<sup>9</sup> We see various modes of these writings emerge to challenge "minority" and activist identities. For example, writers like Andrew Sullivan and Ann Coulter, both use their respective identities as gay and female to challenge assumptions around what their sexual and gender might presume. Most of these writings arrive as a backlash to a culture of political correctness that has defined America in the post-Civil Rights moment.

<sup>10</sup> See King-Kok Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 234–51.

<sup>11</sup> Literary scholars have argued the generic divisions between the memoir and the autobiography, I choose not to make such distinctions.

<sup>12</sup> Their critiques were not generalized to all autobiographies, but were directed towards novels that capitulated to white racism. They distinguished the autobiography from “autobiographical narratives” like Mine Okubo’s *Citizen 13660* as emulating the “experience” of internment from “an artist’s point of view” (xxi). In Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (New York: Mentor, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Chin et al., *Aiiieeeee!*, xix.

<sup>14</sup> Yahlin Chang’s article in *Newsweek* outlines some of the criticisms around Liu’s thesis around racial identity. In “Asian Identity Crisis: A Young Asian-American Author Defends His Assimilation—And Draws Fire From Activists,” *Newsweek*, June 22, 1998, accessed September 15, 2009, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>15</sup> There is a rich comparative gender and class analysis available between these two memoirs, which I will not flesh out here, but it is interesting to note how Kingston’s novel enacts as a voice, through “talk story” comparatively to Liu’s written word. Also, Kingston’s urban Chinatown upbringing comparatively to Liu’s suburban home.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire’s End* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 195–196.

<sup>19</sup> Despite the fact that Filipinos, Indians, Chinese, Singaporeans, and many other Asian countries that are product of colonial rule are subject to education in English language and relative linguistic hegemony of English globally, there is a prevailing assumption that English can be used to identify and distinguish Americans from immigrant-foreigners. This sentiment is especially profound for Asians in the U.S., whose histories of colonialism, American empire, and cultural imperialism are often elided from histories.

<sup>20</sup> David Leiwei Li, “On Ascriptive and Acquisitional Americanness: *The Accidental Asian* and the Illogic of Assimilation,” *Contemporary Literature* 45.1 (2004): 107.

<sup>21</sup> As scholarship in performance studies would attest, language is certainly corporeal, but Liu is pointing to a division between body as nature and language as culture. For him, he privileges culture and belief as the site of identity. I thank Josephine Lee for providing this clarification.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic & The Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), 25.

<sup>25</sup> Chow, *The Protestant Ethic*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> See Susan Koshy, “Morphing Whiteness into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” *boundary 2* 28.1 (2001): 153–194.

<sup>27</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 89.

<sup>28</sup> Liu’s definition of “Asian American” points to how racial subscription for Asians in the U.S. is determined by a different set of logics and rules than for instance, African Americans. He writes:

“One thing Professional Asian Americans are quick to point out is that they are not honorary whites. Fair enough: one would like to be able to do well in this country without being called white. [...] But something Professional Asian Americans sometimes overlook is that they are not honorary blacks either. African Americans created the template for minority politics in this country. That template, set in the heavy type of protest and opposition, is not always the best fit for Asian Americans. For Asian Americans haven’t the moral purchase that blacks have upon our politics” (73).

Referring to how “Professional Asian Americans” or Asian American activists have challenged the “model minority” stereotype as depicting Asians in the U.S. as “almost white,” Liu in turn assumes that “Professional Asian Americans” desire to be seen as “honorary black.” The assumption being that honorary blackness guarantees or legitimates their positions as racial minorities, but Liu is quick to note that Asian Americans are not “honorary blacks.” I elaborate upon the economy of morality and racial politics further in Chapter 3 through Linda Williams’ analytical framework of “racial melodrama.” See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> The examples of *The Jazz Singer* and *The Woman Warrior* also speak to the politics of language as well both diegetically and extradiegetically. For more see: Michael Rogin, *Blackface White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Eric Lott’s analysis of language in minstrelsy is also useful in “White Kids and No Kids At All,” *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the*

*American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995); and Anne Cheng's analysis on *The Woman Warrior* in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> See Kim Ja Park Nelson, "Korean Looks, American Eyes: Korean American Adoptees, Race, Culture and Nation" (PhD diss, University of Minnesota, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Jodi Herdt, *Jodi's Sweet Spot*, accessed February 28, 2002, [http://octopus\\_8.tripod.com/](http://octopus_8.tripod.com/).

<sup>32</sup> Kaja Silverman writes, "The notion of an 'acoustic mirror' can be applied with remarkable precision to the function which the female voice is called upon to perform for the male subject. Within the traditional familial paradigm, the maternal voice introduces the child to its mirror reflection.... [...] Since the child's economy is organized around incorporation, and since what is incorporated is the auditory field articulated by the maternal voice, the child could be said to hear itself initially through that voice—to first 'recognize' itself in the vocal 'mirror' supplied by the mother" (80). In noting this vital stage of formation for masculine identity, Silverman assesses that normative masculinity is acquired by "jettison[ing]...the vocal and auditory 'afterbirth' which threatens to contaminate the order and system of 'proper' speech" (81). We observe how Liu's own desires for individualism and invisibility of the body is pursued by relegating his mother and the maternal traces of lineage (i.e. his grandmother) to the realm of the visible, geographic, and domestic, which can ultimately be transcended through reproduction and mobility. At the same time, he is always reminded by such traces visually, but also acoustically when he must communicate with his grandmother and mother and "hears all the repudiated elements of his infantile babble" (81)—his broken Chinese also results in broken English. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> See Anne Anlin Cheng's chapter on *Flower Drum Song*: "Beauty and Ideal Citizenship: Inventing Asian America in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* (1961)," *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) and David Eng, "Primal Scenes: Queer Childhood in 'The Shoyu Kid,'" *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>35</sup> See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 1285-1302.

<sup>36</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*, 111.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*, 112. See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*, 112.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>42</sup> Shelby Steele, "The Age of White Guilt: And the Disappearance of the Black Individual," *Harper's Magazine*, (November 2002): 33.

<sup>43</sup> This is particularly evident in performances of the Asian body on stage, television, and film. The use of yellowface in recent memory is one way we can think about the flexibility of the Asian body and Asian racial formations. Especially because the performances of Asians by whites are still prevalent in the contemporary moment from Jonathan Pryce in *Miss Saigon* to the characters performed by the white members of *Saturday Night Live*, while these performances are certainly questionable, it might opportune questions about the racial body and authenticity.

<sup>44</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 18–9.

<sup>45</sup> For Liu, he attempts to challenge perceptions of Chinatown as severed from the United States calling this "The Chinatown Idea." He writes, "The Chinatown idea tells us...that Chinatown *chooses* to exempt itself from America: that it is purely the product of Chinese clannishness and insularity. This is perhaps the cruelest myth. For Chinatown is nothing if not thoroughly ours. And the insularity that sustains it is not only Chinese" (96). But in challenging such popular stereotypes of Chinatown, he also maintains and supports them. One trope that he relies upon is depicting the temporal differences between Chinatown and the space outside of its realm by comparing his grandmother and himself. He describes his grandmother's life and home as if it is lodged in time describing the various objects in her home as "frayed," "stiff," "1979," "grimy," "old," "lumpy," congealed," "faded." As Liu writes, "Time moved so slowly when I was at Po-Po's" (91). And according to Liu, his grandmother believes that she needs "wings" to "come see...where [he] lives"

(92), not only remarking upon the temporal difference of his grandmother's space, but a spatial difference only available to her reach by wings. Thus, for his grandmother as well, Liu exists in a different space as well.

<sup>46</sup> Liu also distinguishes himself from those who work within Chinatown that he admires. In describing a labor activist who organizes in Chinatown that he meets, Liu writes, "She has a direct manner, a young face, a strong, low voice. She speaks with a trace of an accent, the rough edges of a 1.5-generation speaker. Not quite native" (108). He continues, "My first impression upon meeting Trinh was that she was far more Chinese than I: engaged with the community, fluent. Also, less polished, less assimilated than I. But there are some who would consider her very un-Chinese. She speaks up she fights, she exposes hypocrisy. She cares less about race than about basic moral courage. That, not her insider's knowledge of Chinatown, is at the root of her authenticity. The irony is this: I am perhaps more Americanized. She is perhaps more American" (108–9). In characterizing Trinh as "American" comparatively to himself as "Americanized," Liu seems to imply that her struggle is one conditioned on the universalizing tenets of the nation, when her work as a labor organizer is actually a critique of the contradictions of the nation-state and transnational capitalisms. Moreover, we can see how Liu again highlights language as something that marks her as not Americanized, but rather American.

<sup>47</sup> Here, we might be able to explore the relationship between the self-same body and another psychoanalytic formation: narcissism as it relates to the socially differentiated body. In Freud's essay "On Narcissism," pathological narcissism is best seen and most easily diagnosed in those racial, gendered, and sexually differentiated from the presumed white, heteromale bourgeois subject. With the exception of his diagnosis of the homosexual, which we can easily presume as Freud's patient is racially white and sexed male, the spectacular embodiments of the racially other and feminine subject and their psychic disease. To examine the example of the racial/primitive subject, Freud writes, "[W]e find characteristics which, if they occurred singly, might be put down to megalomania: an over-estimation of the power of their wishes and mental acts, the 'omnipotence of thoughts,' a belief in the thaumaturgic force of words, and a technique for dealing with the external world—'magic'—which appears to be a logical application of these grandiose premises" (547). Liu's anxieties of becoming the self-same, Asian American body is akin to the primitive's narcissistic condition, whose thoughts and words are perceived as direct flows of actions from its body, which is conflated with the psychic. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company).

<sup>48</sup> In many ways, I wonder how Liu's ambivalence towards the "Professional Asian American" is and might enable a critique of the institutionalization of Asian American. Oftentimes, I see his critique of Asian America not so much about its grassroots politics, but rather its emergence as a market-driven formation of identity.

<sup>49</sup> If Liu is looking in the camera, it is difficult to tell whether he is actually seeing Dinesh D'Souza in this scene. He is most likely looking in a camera and listening to his vocal feed, which would be another analytical dimension to this scene.

<sup>50</sup> Remember, Liu's anxieties of racial identification are most palpable from other Asian Americans who hail him as Asian American. In entering Yale, Liu explains his wariness of seeing an Asian American student social club tabling on campus. He writes, "[T]he clean-cut Korean boy at the AASA table... and though he had merely offered an introductory hello and was now smiling mutely at me, in the back of my mind I heard only this: *Excuse me, are you Asian? Are you Asian?*" (48–9, author's emphasis). In spite of already deciding not "to be so pigeonholed," Liu's anxieties of interpellation come from the prospects of its impending hail, which never really transpire, instead he voluntarily approaches the table and performs the polite task of taking a flyer.

<sup>51</sup> Judith Butler, "Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All," *Yale French Studies* 88 (1995): 11.

<sup>52</sup> Shelby Steele calls this the "Baldwin model" after James Baldwin. He writes, "The goal of the Baldwin model is to link one's intellectual reputation to the moral authority—the moral glamour—of an oppressed group's liberation struggle" (37). In "The Age of White Guilt." I think what these writers struggle with is the distinction of activist identity and activist intellectualism. In other words, how do we think of race as a discourse that enables further thinking of justice, rather than assuming that justice lies within the privacy of our homes and personal thoughts. Here, we see two different paths of imagining justice: one that prioritizes the individual and to out-think racism and the other, which constantly sees power and hegemony located narrowly in institutions without taking notice how power is discursively managed. In other words, activist identity can also be as much of a hegemonic formulation as well as liberal individualism.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, "Conscience Doth..." 14.

<sup>54</sup> Butler, "Conscience Doth..." 17.

<sup>55</sup> Throughout the memoir, Liu's use of "me" and "I" are interesting. In noting his status as an American and individual, he usually depends on "I" making himself as the subject, but writes of his ethnicity as "me." He ultimately relies on his white wife and Chinese mother to understand what about him might make him "Chinese":

My wife and mother both contend that I have a strong streak of Chinese in me, in my way of being. Carroll cites the following as evidence: I keep things close; I don't like to have house guests; I worry about appearances; I am loyal to family; I am a responsible elder child; I work hard; I resist change in small things; I think Chinese food is superior. Mom locates my Chineseness elsewhere: in my respect for Chinese culture, in my sense of personal balance, in my understanding of obligation and duty. (184)

Here, we see Liu acting as both the individual subject ("I") and being defined as the ethnic object ("me"). In a list noting the ways he is "white," he writes, he characterizes his whiteness through material and intellectual consumption such as "khaki Dockers," "Crate & Barrel," and "subscription to *Foreign Affairs*" (33–34), and his distance from minority affect such as "I have never once been the victim of blatant discrimination" and "I am wary of ethnic militants" (33–4), but the one he that is contingent to these refrains is his English, but especially what his articulations of English has acquired him—remember that Liu was a speechwriter for Clinton. His Americanness and "whiteness" is constructed and defined by Liu, but it's important for Liu to remain the ethnic object only at someone else's definition.

<sup>56</sup> Butler, "Conscience Doth..." 7–8.

<sup>57</sup> Towards this end, Liu must continuously perform his faith and feeling in America as an external affective manifestation, his emotions unfold at the sounds and images that represent America comparatively to the latex glove treatment of Asian America: "The Asian American narrative is rooted deeply in threat. That is one of the main things polygot Americans of Asian descent have had in common: the fear of being discriminated against simply on account of being metaphorically if not genetically, Chinamen" (69). Instead, the image of his newlywed parents is described as "heartbreakingly American," and later, "a fiftieth-anniversary tribute to the heroes of D-Day" causes "[w]elling in my eyes, catching in my throat at a *nation's* memory" (154). These scenes warrant feeling as they are part of "a *nation's* memory, a public history," as he adds "something that I, too, could claim" (154).

<sup>58</sup> Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Considering the linguistic genealogy that differentiates the experience of Filipinos and East Asians, the editors relied on Filipino writers to write the introduction to Filipino American literature as a separate formation.

<sup>61</sup> Daniel Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2005), 38.

<sup>62</sup> Kim, *Writing Manhood*, 216.

<sup>63</sup> Liu cites Benedict Anderson's theorization of the nation as forged through the emergence of "print-capitalism" to support his claims of identity politics as akin to creating a separate nation. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>64</sup> For Liu, Asian American cannot be a hybrid site of cultural synthesis compared to American. He writes, "America is exceptional not only because it provides due process and a setting for free cultural expression but also because it *synthesizes* the many cultures it welcomes. Far more than in Bourne's time, America now is indeed a transnationality: an amalgamation, a seedbed for once unthinkable hybrids. *It is precisely in an age of globalization that America becomes the most necessary place on earth. That is why we owe it our undivided loyalty*" (128, my emphasis).

<sup>65</sup> We can locate his racialized logics of culture as informed by multicultural liberalism and the separation of culture and politics. Vijay Prashad writes, "It becomes difficult to determine if the drive toward authenticity comes from within the group as spontaneous self-affirming act, or if authenticity is nothing but a paranoid reaction to the 'naturalness' of dominant groups. Why should 'black' be authentic when 'white is hardly even seen as a color, let alone pressured to demonstrate its authenticity?" (211). In *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Ironically, Patricia Chu notes: "Chin's argument, which has become one of the shaping paradigms for Asian American cultural studies, was an extension of the exclusion story into the cultural arena. In what I'll call Chin's extinction thesis, he argued that the underlying idea of America as a white nation, and Americans, as whites has been translated into the cultural exclusion of color peoples from positions of unmarked, or



universal, subjectivity in American culture. Thus, Asian Americans were expected to identify with Asian cultures even if born and raised in the United States. They were never perceived as American, and they found their particular experiences as Asian Americans devalued or erased from cultural productions.

A significant corollary of this point (the emasculation thesis) was that Asian American men were not only materially and politically marginalized but culturally emasculated as well, both as characters in cultural productions and as authors, creators, or interpreters of such productions” (64–5). In Patricia P. Chu,

*Assimilating Asians*.

<sup>67</sup> Likewise, I would suggest that for Liu comparatively to the commodification of racial difference under liberal multiculturalism he sees the uncommodifiable nature of America as another sign of its pure and universal possibility. At the same time, as scholars have portrayed, the very construct of America has depended on the commodification of racialized and gendered labor as well as fostered consumerism as central to produce and participate this imagined community.

**Chapter Two**  
**“Way too weird. Way too dark. Way too depressing”:** Transnational Compositions as  
 Genealogies of Un/belonging

In the previous chapter, I examined how Eric Liu relies on articulations of English to constitute a national identity. Here, I turn to Patti Kim’s novel *A Cab Called Reliable*<sup>1</sup> about a precocious, misanthropic Korean immigrant girl named Ahn Joo, who struggles to apprehend her abandonment by her mother through practices of writing. The novel helps us further understand the limitations of Liu’s post-racial cultural politics of language as authorizing his claims to nation-as-home, but also quells a parallel desire to use diaspora as productive of belonging that is alternative to the nation-state.

Published in 1997, the novel takes place in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. during the budding era of institutionalized multiculturalism as indicated by Ahn Joo’s passage through the public school system. Her assimilation to social norms is placed in relation to her father’s economic aspirations, and their negotiations to these expected temporalities of American life in the absence of her mother propels her storytelling. As such, writing becomes a profound way for her to mediate a world that demands her to conform to recognizable expectations of an Asian/American girlhood, and re-imagining formations of belonging that elude her. Ahn Joo negotiates the pedagogical mandates of the classroom to produce national subjects by refusing to be reduced to a national, racial, ethnic, or gender identity, as she asserts herself as “not only a...Korean-American, I was a Korean-American woman” (113). This adamant identification as “Korean-American woman” highlights the gendered terms of her racial and ethnic subjectivity, which ultimately prefigures her challenges in finding security and comfort in sentiments of belonging. Compared to Eric Liu’s identifications as “Chinese-American,” which signifies his

ethnicity as an essentialized category that is lost and aestheticized under the process of assimilation, Ahn Joo's intersectional identity designates a transnational production of ethnic, gender, and racial which positions her as an il/legible subject according to dominant formations of belonging.

Instead of depicting this retreat from belonging as contributing to a sense of social unease, the novel offers an affecting intervention by illustrating how formations of belonging that are oriented around homes, nations, and diasporas are often construed as protecting us from violence, but in actuality, as Jigna Desai argues in her critique of diaspora, are constitutive of violence.<sup>2</sup> While this revelation might assume despair, I examine how it contemplates the possibilities of a “reparative diaspora,”<sup>3</sup> which are produced by what Avtar Brah calls a “homing desire.” Homing desire “is not the same thing as desire for a ‘homeland’”<sup>4</sup> or home, but productive of connectivities that are constitutive yet illegible to the nationalisms’ politics of visibility. The novel’s first-person narrative portrays the repressive violence of belonging, but the *mise en abyme*—Ahn Joo’s writings—provides reparative bearings of diaspora that challenge dominant discourses of diaspora and consider unbelonging as an affective mode of connectivity.

In Asian American cultural studies, diaspora is a formative analytic to theorize home and identity as deterritorialized concepts, complicating conceptions of Asianness as affiliated to authentic origins and homelands. This chapter pays attention to formations of diaspora through the production of Koreanness. Recent scholarship point to formations of Korean diaspora and its transnational identifications as constituted through “transgenerational hauntings”<sup>5</sup> or “transgenerational memories”<sup>6</sup> of the Korean War. Ji-Yeon Yuh’s article, “Moved by War: Migration, Diaspora and the Korean War,” is notable for reframing of Korean immigration from a post-1965 U.S.-destined phenomenon to a post-1945 global movement shaped by the consequences of the Korean War and its militarization and partition.

Yuh's insights challenges dominant perceptions of Korean migrations as produced by economic aspirations, labor fulfillment, and familial unifications. She argues these collective movements were motivated by "refuge" for "a deep psychological need to leave behind chaos, and insecurity, and trauma, and [to] seek out emotional/mental peace and a stable environment."<sup>77</sup> Under such conditions, home and identity are fraught certainties rather than comforting desires.

The enduring legacies of the Forgotten War are formative in engendering diasporic identifications of community and identity that "rely on shared memory and experience rather than nation-state ties"; a "consciousness."<sup>78</sup> But as Benedict Anderson is apt to remind us, the nation is an "imagined community,"<sup>79</sup> a collectivity also drawn by memory and experience. Yuh's theorization of Korean migration and diaspora as conditioned by the Korean War is significant because it challenges standard approaches to diaspora as contingent upon an anachronistic homeland, but her conceit that it goes "beyond the nation" requires complicating as the nation is not merely a juridical geopolitical state. As her scholarship demonstrates, the nation is also a cultural formation circumscribed by memory and experience that enables diasporic belongings. Such conceptions of diaspora echo the nationalist politics emulated in the writings of Eric Liu and Frank Chin, who condition their belonging as heteronormative, monogamous, and ontic in relation to the nation and its ideals. These alignments note how diasporas iterate constrained formations of identity dependent on nationalist discourses of recuperation and reproduction.

This is further exemplified in the way that Yuh imagines diaspora as offering notions of identity as transcending yet situated in nationalities. She writes, "[Overseas Koreans] are asserting their brand of Koreanness as authentic and are challenging the authenticity of Koreanness in Korea. At the same time, they are also asserting themselves as Japanese, or as American, or as Chinese." These promiscuous identifications are demonstrative of a

“freewheeling diasporic identity—with its demands for multiple inclusion and rights.”<sup>10</sup> The “freewheeling diasporic identity” doesn’t seem to be so freewheeling when its demands (i.e. “inclusion and rights”) are for identity formations that are already orthodox in their conceit.

At the same time, scholars in Asian American studies contend there is an immense sense of affinity available through diasporic imaginings of belonging especially for those who are deferred from fixed notions of home and nation. In noting the intimate terms of homeland nation-state and diaspora, Desai argues that homelands and diasporas are not causal or independent productions, but are “mutually constituted through cultural, political, and material processes.” She adds, “[W]hile the standard model assumes that diasporas are shadows of always pre-existing homelands, attempting to replicate homeland cultural practices and communities, it may be more productive to see diasporas and homelands dynamically related as they participate in unequal but multidirectional exchanges and flows.”<sup>11</sup> Desai warns us that diaspora cannot be privileged over the nation as a more sanctified production of belonging because it assumes to transcend the cultural, political, and material expectations of the nation. Even in its most hopeful and transgressive imaginings, diaspora is defined by its relationship to the nation and its borders.

A close reading of Patti Kim’s *A Cab Called Reliable* offers potential points to enter the imaginative possibilities of a reparative diaspora. The novel considers how transnational compositions of Korean Americans disrupt representations of immigration as unidirectional narratives of departure, assimilation, and settlement between independent coordinates of here and there, destination and origin. I use transnational compositions<sup>12</sup> to describe the discursive practices in which the Asian immigrant as a culture figure becomes discernible through border-crossings, geopolitical treaties and laws, labor sectors, social institutions, human rights agendas, and popular cultures, but also resist recognition under its authority. Transnational compositions considers the narrative and aesthetic modes that might offer surreptitious

legibility to imaginations of identity and collectivity that are “illegible in the official discourse” of nationalisms. In turn, the novel through Ahn Joo’s writing considers the material necessity of cultural practice by negotiating the complex terms in which identities are disciplined to conform, but how those definitions never wholly circumscribe our livelihoods or imaginations, and secure as it should be.

It considers how the Asian immigrant is not a figure in need of identity and its constructs of home, citizenship, and belonging. Through representations of her absent mother and the relationship with her father, the novel’s narrative and Ahn Joo’s elliptical writing undo the rigid temporal structures that narrativize national and diasporic approaches to home and identity as inevitably transgenerational and heteronormative.

### **I. Transnational Compositions and Anxieties of the Domestic**

The novel’s opening scenes illustrate how domestic spaces of nation and home do not absolve and privatize difference, but maintain gendered, racial, and economic imbalances that enact alienation. Comparing the geographies of Arlington and Pusan, Korea on her walk from school, Ahn Joo experiences nostalgia for her old friend in Korea. To both suppress her memories of Korea, she practices reciting The Pledge of Allegiance. The Pledge promises to her liberate of her burdens as an Asian immigrant girl, but the performance anxieties that attend her vows expose the irresolvable material contradictions of her subjectivity. Ahn Joo’s inability to properly perform and represent the ideals of The Pledge illustrates the divisive nature of its demands. Her felt distance from the possibilities of abstract citizenship are further exacerbated as she witnesses her mother leaving in a cab with her younger brother, abandoning her and her father.

As the story unfolds, we learn that her mother’s departure is prompted by her father’s reenactment of the patriarchal violence that impelled her family’s immigration to the U.S. While we are offered little detail about their lives in Korea, it is evident their escape from her

grandfather does not promise domestic renewal and stability in America. Instead, the U.S. and their apartment are spaces in which those pasts are rehearsed differently. For her father, their relocation to Arlington insulates him from the immediacy of his father's cruelty, but for her mother, it defines their existence as oppressive. In identifying these distinctions, we observe how Ahn Joo's family's immigration has different implications for each member. The concepts of home, identity, and belonging are not singular, but as Avtar Brah observes, "the same geographical and psychic space come to articulate different 'histories' and how 'home' can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror."<sup>13</sup>

Women—as wives and mothers—often function as embodiments of the domestic. In *A Cab Called Reliable*, Korean women whose duties are to fulfill the normative conditions of home result in madness, grief, or "homesickness." In her analysis of the Bollywood film *Bhaji on the Beach*, Jigna Desai disrupts the common perception of diaspora as fostering an alternative imagination of home. Diaspora-as-home assumes it as a private space where ethnic community can be maintained in alternative to the public structures of national and state powers and its cultures. Desai argues the film's portrayal of South Asian women considers how women as embodiments of diaspora and its discourses of home reveal the delineations between the private and public are false binaries. Furthermore, in differentiating the private/domestic from the public/political relegates feminist cultural politics to the privatized realm of the particular, private, and domestic. Approaching diaspora as an embodied racial, gendered, and sexual formation, portrays how houses and homes in diaspora and within the nation-state are mutually constitutive formations that institute, regulate and also reconfigure social norms.<sup>14</sup>

In the novel, the immigrant family and its houses are regularly scrutinized as nonnormative formations and objects of orientalist fantasy. This sentiment is amplified following the departure of Ahn Joo's mother as her school becomes the agent of surveillance to track her social calibration. She explains, "Mr. Albert, Miss Martin, the librarian, the

secretary, Mrs. Lubbock, the guidance counselor; they were all so damn nosy. [...] What's it to them if I wear the same jumper every day of the week? What's it to them if my father can't meet them for conference time? I wish they'd stop asking about my mother" (52). In her mother's absence, it becomes Ahn Joo's task to make her home legible and render her mother a scrutable object for public purview.

Ahn Joo's perceptive skills for language and storytelling are fostered to navigate the social worlds that exclude yet interrogate her inability to conform. Initially, Ahn Joo displays her creative talents for storytelling through palmistry. At the birthday celebration of a popular classmate named Yvonne Weaver, Ahn Joo covets Yvonne's relationship with her "full-bearded dentist" father and "smart and important" mother, who have brought cupcakes and streamers. While the other students are immersed in play, Ahn Joo eavesdrops in her parents' conversation with their teacher Mr. Greer and hears that Yvonne would receive a pet beagle for her birthday. The information emboldens Ahn Joo to connect with Yvonne and her cool clique of friends, and offer her a reading. Ahn Joo takes her "right hand because the left always lied," (63) and proceeds to claim Yvonne's love for animals would be honored with a dog.

When Ahn Joo's prediction proves true, she earns a reputation as "Palmer," and mythologizes her gift as transmitted from a maternal lineage of soothsayers to charge her clamoring peers a quarter to forecast their destinies. Ahn Joo is clearly aware of her lowly place in the classroom strata, but her storytelling forges a new sense of belonging that supplants her usual feelings of isolation and loneliness. Such fates change when Ahn Joo rejects Yvonne's demands for a second reading, and later is physically rejected by Yvonne when she returns to fulfill her request. Yvonne's rejection incites shame and thoughts of self-mutilation, "Why did she hit me? I plugged up my ears to keep myself from hearing voices. I wanted to pull out my eyes to keep myself from seeing pictures and cut out my tongue to keep myself from telling tales" (69). Ahn Joo figures her unruly compulsion for storytelling must be contained and



managed. In her apartment, she takes out her box of quarters, and writes down “the name and story I told, filling the back and front of a sheet of paper with words. I folded it into a small triangle.... [...] [A]nd burned my triangle telling God I would never read palms again, praying that He would forgive me and change me, make me blind, deaf, and dumb. As I watched my writing turn to ashes, I sighed in relief...” (70). The storytelling to story-writing channels her extrasensory impulses onto paper—a more formal and legitimate venue of expression.

The following chapter marks Ahn Joo’s final year in elementary school, and she properly harnesses her impulse for invention through the encouragement of a teacher. Coincidentally, throughout the novel, female teachers advance creativity whereas the male teachers adhere to a classic Western pedagogical tradition of humanities focused on Christopher Columbus and his three boats and textbooks like *Our Western Civilization* that reconcile the material, social, cultural, and historic differences of students under the enlightenment of “Our” Western Civilization. The teacher, who is strangely unnamed unlike Miss Washburn (third grade), Mr. Albert (fourth grade), and Mr. Greer (fifth grade), expresses an orientalist fascination, which Ahn Joo gladly feeds with writings and objects. If palm reading served as an unregulated (capitalist and narrative) mode of expression, here we see how its formalization makes it in danger of becoming inhibited and rote.

Ahn Joo’s stories adapts information about Korea from *World Book* encyclopedia entries, the same text she learned how read palms, to emulate her life in Korea as remarkably normal. Whereas previously *World Book* was suggestive of a medium for her storytelling, it becomes the inspiration for its contents. Its effectiveness is evident in her teacher’s insatiable hunger for such stories, which affirms her ambitions to be a successful writer, but also curbs inquisitions about her mother. Ahn Joo notes, “My teacher loved anything I wrote that was about Korea. She sighed and became teary-eyed when I showed her Korean dolls...and even

silk flowers that were made in Hong Kong” (79–80). The encyclopedia becomes the reference that guides her performance of Western ideals of Koreanness, and in turn, family and home.

Ahn Joo’s romanticized identifications to Korea become de-romanticized when her father exposes the violences that produce its space as homeland. Ahn Joo’s confident transformation into a writer parallels her father’s uncharacteristic boot of determination that leads to a purchase of a vending truck that would park near the Washington Monument. Forced to sit with her father on his first day out, Ahn Joo sketches the essay she confidently anticipates will win first place in the school’s annual writing contest. The school’s authorized topics for the contest: “My Family” deems the positive outcomes of its related theme, “What the Future Holds for Me.” She writes:

*When I lived in Korea, I used to climb cypress trees that grew near the village well. From the highest branch, I could see the gate, the tiles on the roof of our house, and the enclosed veranda where my mother would be peeling and stringing whole persimmons to dry for the upcoming holiday. She wore a beautiful green hanbok, and her hair was braided in a tight bun held by a jade pin. The Thanksgiving holiday is one of the most important holidays in Korea, when all members of the family gather together to pay respect to their ancestors. My name is Ahn Joo Cho and I was born in Korea. (79, author’s emphasis)*

The piece aestheticizes her family, reflecting encyclopedia entries on Korea, but her livelihood is so vastly different from the description. She notes earlier that “Unlike most of the Korean families I knew, [my father] did not bring us to America in order to make a million dollars. He simply wanted to run away from his father, who used to beat his mother crazy until he kicked her out for being crazy” (76–7). Ahn Joo’s distance from the normative ideals of childhood and its home diminish in her stories. But her narrative, like the *World Book*, organizes this life as possible only through the erasure and invisibility of Western presence and knowledge-making. This sentiment is expressed in the following sentence of her essay, “*Korea is divided into two nations at the thirty-eighth parallel, and the nation of South Korea is known as the land of the morning calm*” (83). In describing the politically divisive geography of Korea, there is no elaboration on how

and why the nation became bifurcated. The border warrants no meaning, and the country is quickly interpreted as unsoiled—“the land of the morning calm.”

In drafting her essay, Ahn Joo revisits the encyclopedia’s entry on Pusan, noting the city is known for its herring, and in a rare moment asks her father asks, “What’s herring?” (83). He leafs through a Korean-English dictionary, and discovers its translation—“*Chung uh*.” He explains that they caught Chung uh in a local river, “but they weren’t the real kind” (84). Ahn Joo strives to reflect Korean culture authentically, but her father’s explanation of Chung uh as not being the same as herring reflects what is lost in translation:

‘Isn’t there a lot of herring in Pusan?’ I asked.  
 ‘There’s plenty of herring in Pusan. But Pusan’s known for its belt fish,’ he said.  
 My mother had fried us belt fish once in America, but after finding white, pebblelike growths on them, she never bought or fried another.  
 ‘Are you sure it’s belt fish?’ I asked, not remembering the *World Book* ever telling me anything about belt fish in Pusan.  
 With outstretched arms, he said they grew as long as belts that could hold up the pants belonging to a fat man. Holding his middle finger up at me, he said that his sister used to cut the fish into pieces about this long. I laughed at my father because he did not know he was signaling his daughter to fuck herself. Encouraged by my laughter, he continued, ‘The meat grows in four long strips. She used to pull off the two outer strips for herself because of the bones on the sides. She gave me the two inner strips.’ (84–5)

At first Ahn Joo doubts her father, but his detailed recollection of his sister’s preparation of the fish piques Ahn Joo’s curiosity. He explains that her aunt Han-il was accepted a prestigious women’s college, but was not allowed to attend as their father refused to pay for her tuition. After their mother was replaced by another woman and expelled from their home, Han-il “lost it” becoming incontinent and listening to walls. Their father eventually married her off to pay off some business debts, but Han-il didn’t last long, returning to her mad habits and ended up in a Buddhist temple tending to its monks. Her father concludes “that Han-il *noo nab* seemed happy there” (87).

Prior to this moment, her mother’s outspoken desires to return to Korea following their immigration to the U.S. contributes to Ahn Joo’s idealization of Korea as a haven that

would restore her mother as a maternal figure. The story of Han-il captivates Ahn Joo, and she comes to the realization that her writings of Korea cannot offer redemptions of families and their homes, and vows “never to go to the *World Book* for stories” (87). This declaration is formalized through the reparation of her aunt in another story, “I wanted to write a story about my aunt Han-il, giving her another life because I did not believe she could be happy cooking meals for a bunch of silent men. I refused to participate in her suffering; she would be redeemed from that life into another by *my imagination*” (88, my emphasis).

At the nation’s capital, two significant moments of possibility diverge towards competing temporal orientations of home: one is her father’s hungry look to the future while Ahn Joo’s writing is reoriented towards the past for the purposes of a redemptive present and future. While Ahn Joo’s mind is in the past/present conjuring her Aunt Han-il, her father chatters about the present/future dreaming of his own grocery store and “a brick house somewhere far from Burning Rock Court.” She explains her preoccupation:

I told my father yes, yes, it was all fine with me, but I was not listening to him. My mind had been on my aunt Han-il all afternoon, and during the drive back home she was still alive somewhere between *my memory* and *imagination*. I could not stop thinking about her and how I would save her from her misery. [...] As my father talked about good weather being good for business and bad weather being bad for business, I traced letters onto *my left palm with my right index finger* I formed the first words of my new story that would surely win first place. (89, my emphasis)

Her intention to grant her aunt redemption through her *imagination* is fascinating and considers how she uses writing to negotiate possibilities otherwise unavailable in her lived existence.

Furthermore, as I stated she initiates a formal practice of writing to discipline her unfettered penchant for storytelling by reading palms, but we here we see how the vestiges of that former life facilitate a process that considers both memory and imagination.

But in providing her aunt redemption through such fictive measures, Ahn Joo writes a story that in the words of her teacher, “One is required to suspend an unreasonable amount of one’s disbelief” (90). Her story begins with her father’s memories, and continues to restore her

aunt as a lady vengeance who poisons her family, and concludes with “her living happily ever after” in America, married to a Ph.D. with two daughters. For Ahn Joo, her aunt’s redemption is granted by installing her rightful place in the normative home separated from the horrors of her former life with two daughters. This latter detail is a jab at Ahn Joo’s mother, who she sees as always favoring her younger brother. Redemption for Asian immigrant women, and in this case, Korean women, through the home and nation as a private place of comfort requires one to “suspend an unreasonable amount of...disbelief” even as a piece of fiction.

Disappointed by the material, her teacher asks, “Ahn Joo, do you ever hear voices?,” and tells her “to *listen* to them” (90, my emphasis). Her teacher’s suggestion counters the covenant she made with God for her reputation as the “Palmer” “to plug up her ears to from hearing voices, to pull her eyes from seeing pictures, and to cut out my tongue to keep her from telling tales.” Following her instructions, Ahn Joo states “I laid down in the center of the room with my palms pressed on the floor and my eyes closed, I heard the voice of my mother” (91). When writing the story of her aunt Han-il, Ahn Joo drafts it by using her right index finger to trace letters on her left palm. Before, Ahn Joo states that in palm reading the right hand is privileged over the lies told by the left. When her teacher dismisses the effects from this creative process, Ahn Joo returns to listening for voices, but instead of relying on her ears, she uses her right and left palm to hear the voice of her mother.

The writing scripted from this method defies traditional narrative form, and animates her mother as a succession of contradictory and antagonistic vocalizations. The voice transpires from the space of their *immigrant* home is a place fraught with anxiety, grief, and abuse. The piece begins as an omniscient voice doling old-world maxims, “Chew on parsley if your mouth tastes old. Smear chicken grease on your lips so no one will think you go hungry,” and continues to profile a subject in its bluntly corrective address about social grace and feminine propriety in America. Food is a central metaphor in *A Cab Called Reliable*, and “The

Voice of My Mother” culminates in a series of punitive questions around various requests for Korean foods, “Again? You’re crying again? What do I have to do? You want butter and soy sauce in your rice? You want fried *kimchi*? [...] You expect to find *jja jaang myun* here? *Been deb dduck*, *pabt bing su*, *bo dduck*—in America? Eat what you have or starve. [...] Ahn Joo-yah, what are you crying for? Did your mother die? What are you crying for?” (95). The text is punctuated by the revelation of its subject—Ahn Joo, and its demand to know the punitive affects of its address—“What are you crying for?”

The piece is uncanny in its conceit, and is self-consciously described as “prose poetry” by Ahn Joo. The mother that reverberates here deviates from the mother that she originally imagines for her contest-winning story. That mother is staged in a tile-roofed home, beautifully costumed in a traditional hanbok peeling persimmons to hang and dry, she is a genteel figure set in a diorama that situates her daughter as an observer from branches of a cypress tree. That mother is mute and inaccessible comparatively to this mother, who is only a voice, a disembodied and sonic projection that stem from the alienations of immigration, motherhood, and marriage. The Asian (immigrant) woman often apprehends legibility as the figure par excellence of liberal multiculturalism as sublime aesthetic that domesticates her concerns, but here, immigrant woman as culture is abstracted when conflating private and public space.

Ahn Joo’s piece defies a proper narrative structure, but moreover depicts the telos of immigration and American life as an impediment to the possibility of making and maintaining a proper home. Yet, in its departure from the multiculturalist illustrations of Korea, her teacher embraces the piece praising it as “mature, honest, powerful, poignant, and sophisticated piece of writing” (91), earning the top prize in the school’s writing contest. The reading at the graduation ceremony is a source of anxiety for Ahn Joo, which is confirmed by the audience’s awkward “uncomfortable silence” reflected in the assessment of the contest’s other winner, Jennifer Beechum, who states, “Way too weird. Way too dark. Way too depressing” (95).

Compared to the other winning pieces that broker the promise of family and multicultural imaginations such as Jennifer Beechum's "How to Save the World Through Arts and Crafts" about her artist father and Japanese girl who compared her life in Arlington and Kyoto, it seems unexpected that Ahn Joo's "prose poem" would be rewarded. At the same time, the audience's ambivalent response is indicative of the uncertainties and challenges that surround "the weird, the dark, and the depressing" under the hegemony of American liberal multiculturalism.

Ahn Joo's stories and its "weird" form, "dark" tone, and "depressing" content might be rewarded under the auspices of the institution as an "honest, powerful, and poignant" representation of Asian immigrant motherhood in her domestic space. The embrace of her story and its dissonant critique of the American dream express the continuously uneven negotiations of institutions and their politics of visibility. In attempting to privilege particular subject and narrative formations, it can never suppress or erase the ambivalent terms that underwrite its ideals.

In relating the two points, I read "the weird, the dark, and the depressing" as a methodology that requires energetic participation to make sense of unfamiliar lives in unfamiliar "homes." Ahn Joo's narrative and its aesthetically abstract and inventive form depicts home as a space of memories and histories, politics, and cultures that produce disparities. It exceeds the limits of the domestic—home and nation-state—as a space of belonging. Here, home is not of the heart, but a space that requires revamping its entrenched paradigms to complement the affective.

Compared to the story of her aunt, I read "Voice of My Mother" as a transnational composition, which challenges official, normative, and legible representations of personhood, offering surreptitious legibility to the types of livelihoods that can be afforded—materially and psychically—under certain types of migrations. Migrations are also responses to anxieties of the

domestic (home and nation), illustrating diasporas as genealogies of unbelonging as emulated by her father, her aunt, and her mother's migrations both outside and within Korea. These lives are often unrecognizable by institutions and its epistemological mandates and their narrative order. Thus, rather than responding to "the weird, the dark, and the depressing" representations of "home" with mere dismissal, to treat it as a site of curious exploration enables the possibilities to engage and practice—hear with our hands, see with our ears, speak with our eyes—formations of unbelonging in unaccustomed ways.

## **II. Diasporas as Genealogies of Un/belonging**

In "Voice of My Mother," Ahn Joo departs from ideal representations of Korean motherhood, and exposes her mother as a woman who exudes meanness, aggravated by her own inability to properly provide for her family in the U.S. Kandice Chuh writes the significance of the "trope of 'woman-as-nation'" depends on fictions of women as pure, daughterly, and/or maternal, which in turn, "undermin[es the] ... ability to have standing as a person."<sup>15</sup> Woman is conflated with constructs of home, and in turn, the nation, which depends on her embodiment of the pure, daughterly, and maternal. For Ahn Joo's mother, the circumstances of their immigration make it difficult for her to make a proper home, and propels Ahn Joo to reconfigure what it means to belong to both a nation, family, and home. I elaborate upon this conceit, portraying how understandings of home (not necessarily "homeland") require a radical reinvention of social relations and its narrative forms. In being forced to upend normative notions of home, Ahn Joo becomes increasingly suspicious of the coercive measures of institutional and cultural forces that impose racial, gendered, and sexual expectations as well as immediately dispose of those differences when convenient. This becomes pronounced in the novel's concluding commentary about the possibilities of making and imaging homes and houses as two different gestures. As previously stated, the novel portrays how mostly women, but also her father, suffer from anxieties of the domestic.



Initially, we observe how Ahn Joo attaches such disorders with her mother and their displacement in the U.S., and romanticizes Korea as an alternate space where maternal figures can exist happily, but her story of her aunt upends this nostalgic connection, and queries the possibilities of where and how women can find “home.”

In this section, I challenge the affects of belonging that are central to discourses of diaspora and its conceptions of home as transgenerational and heteronormative reproductions. I expand upon Asian American queer scholarship on diaspora to examine how sentiments of belonging writ through diasporas are not wholly circumscribed or dependent on the nation and can, in turn, offer critical interventions to conservative and orthodox framings of home as nation.

Queer and feminist theories take note of the congestive politics of the heteronormative in narratives of diaspora. David Eng and JeeYeun Lee theorize problematizing the heteronormative reproductions of ethnic and racial affiliations immanent to diaspora and its identifications to home. Lee writes, “The idea of generational transmission is central to most conceptions of diaspora. This emphasis on biological reproduction...naturalizes the boundaries of diasporic community, erasing the ways in which community is actively and selectively imagined, constructed, and maintained.”<sup>16</sup> For Lee, narrating histories of Asian immigrants and their communities through a queer *and* diasporic modality interrogates community and identity as inherently reproductive natural truths. In following such possibilities, I argue that we approach diaspora as genealogies of unbelonging to challenge the heteronormative implications of belonging, and emphasize the tenuous conditions that home and identity, collectivity and connectivity are narrated, practiced, and theorized.

When the profits of her father’s vending truck business accumulate to open a brick-and-mortar restaurant that largely caters to blacks, it also affords their purchase out of apartment living and into a house in an affluent suburb of Maryland. In spite of living the

promise of the America dream, Ahn Joo finds the new house and the expectations to name it home confining as both a social and state institution. The move also transfers her to a new school district where she experiences a whole new set of alienating circumstances extenuated by the material and social pressures of adolescence and its environs of privilege and wealth. Their educative policies racially profile her as Chinese to place her in gifted math programs and instructs her to “sing all the prepositions in alphabetical order to the tune of ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy’” (100)—the most appropriate song to learn American English grammar. Her family’s ascendance into middle class reveal the complex navigations of two, competing yet related racial and economic stratas, and their fold into these processes of racialization are central to American life and the conditions in which they make their home. Her father’s economic success depends on their black clientele, whom Ahn Joo resents, but in turn their capital (racial and economic) allows her to attend a good school where she becomes labeled as a “troubled adolescent” for stealing perfume and writing fake love letters to a girl who is equally rejected as a loser. These irresolvable social and economic tensions produced by racial and gender differences are central to the kinds of belonging that are experienced.

For her father, their new house symbolizes his achievements, absolving his past abuses, but for Ahn Joo, she sees it as another place that authorizes narratives of family and identity that she must subscribe to in order to reproduce the integrity of home. She observes:

I thought a family room with fireplace, living room, dining room, a country kitchen, basement, four bedrooms, two and a half baths were too much for us, but you said, ‘Future. Future. Think about the future.’ So I thought about the future when I entered junior high and high school, and I raised my hand when I didn’t understand how rectification, amplification, and oscillation worked in explaining electrical currents.... [...] When future, future, future finally came, the walls of our house were too close together, the ceilings weren’t high enough, the floors weren’t low enough, and I needed more bedrooms. (152–3)

The possibility of making this place a home requires an orientation towards the future and divestments of the past, and Ahn Joo resists the possibility of making it a home as she attempts to retrieve a mother who only exists in the past. Her writings about Korea emblemize a

homing desire as her ascriptions to home are intimately tied with a mother as illustrated in “The Voice of My Mother.”

Homing desire does not necessarily note a romantic or nostalgic connection to constructs of home, but also illustrates the heterogeneous practices of home that are unmoored of its singularity as emphasized in homeland, nation, and family. In this regard, I further elaborate upon the significance of examining diaspora as genealogies of un/belonging. In her conceptualization of diaspora, Brah notes the significance of approaching diaspora as Foucauldian “genealogies,” “as an ensemble of investigative technologies that historicise trajectories of different diasporas, and analyse their relationality across fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity.”<sup>17</sup> In turn, we have to be aware of the social circumstances and material conditions that produce collective dispersals that lend to the phenomenon of diasporas, and shape their experiences differently. Diasporas do not authorize narratives of truth of where we should belong. JeeYeun Lee writes, “When we approach either historical or spatial narratives as ‘the truth,’ it is too easy too reify and romanticize ‘the past’ or ‘the homeland.’ We can forget that the homeland is not homogeneous, that is also complex, hybrid, and contradictory.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, in the conclusion of her essay, she emphasizes, “We cannot depend solely on histories to justify our existence. Queer and diasporic, wherever we are and whoever we fuck, *the truth is that we always completely belong.*”<sup>19</sup> Although the utopic sentiments of her conclusion are a politics that I empathize with, it seems to elide the complicated terms in which she theorizes diaspora—that perhaps, the truth is we don’t always completely belong.

In acknowledging such complexities, I would argue a reparative diaspora also requires warping the transgenerational, heteronormative temporality of diaspora, which orients belonging as a required and universal sentiment. The regulation of ethnic, gender, sexual, and economic differences are central to the processes of immigration and its attendant projects of making homes. Avtar Brah writes, “The question of home...is intrinsically linked with the way

in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging.’”<sup>20</sup> In noting how constructs of home and its alignments with nation and diaspora are produced around “the social regulation of ‘belonging,’” it underscores the governing terms in which such sentiments are affected and legitimized.<sup>21</sup> Jigna Desai forwards “diaspora critique”<sup>22</sup> to identify how the production of and claiming of belonging through home and origin are central to dominant discourses of diaspora and, like the nation, contingent upon marshalling difference.

In approaching diasporas as intersectional and situated formations constituted by the nation, reparative diasporas highlight how imaginations of belonging are contingent upon the affects of unbelonging. I adapt the idea of unbelonging from Laura Kang, who contends the glaring absence of Asian American women from U.S. and Asian American histories should not be read as an impetus for recuperative projects of visibility, but instead surfaces as “a genealogy of unbelonging.”<sup>23</sup> Diaspora often serves as an antidote to unbelonging, a relief from the traumas of dislocation and exclusion for liminal subjects such as the Asian immigrant. Diasporic critique identifies unbelonging is constitutive of sentiments of belonging. Un/belonging illustrates the dyadic terms of the processes of transnational identifications and diasporic collectivities.

It is this sentiment that Ahn Joo comes to negotiate as she comes to age as a “Korean American woman” and writer. Her father’s orientation to the future is accompanied by his desire to forget the past. His transmission of stories—personal and folklore—to Ahn Joo, who collects these narratives and adapts them in her own writings, mitigates such forgettings as he also is compelled to make corrections and embellishments to her works. For Ahn Joo, these stories constitute a reservoir of memories that when exposed might promise reconciliation for her grandfather’s abuses towards her father and his mother and sister, and their expulsion from

their home/land. Her family's immigration propelled by such domestic traumas, in turn, contributes to her own mother's abandonment. Storytelling for Ahn Joo, on one hand, becomes a way to represent the truth that might make it possible to make a home predicated on belonging rather than refuge, exile and abandonment. On the other hand, in her own aspirations for truth, her storytelling methods—its propensity for adaptation, fictionalizing, and reimagination—portray home under the conditions of immigration and its diasporas as an infinite process rather than a finite destination.

These two competing sensibilities are illustrated in a story she shares with her father following news that his own father had finally died from a disease afflicting “his male organ” symbolizing the end of his patriarchal terror. Hearing the news, Ahn Joo surmises, “[M]y grandfather's death was a relief for the both of us. He had done enough damage in his lifetime, beating the sanity out of his own daughter, beating and driving my father out of his own country, and stashing his first wife away in some remote village. [...] My grandfather's judgment day was long overdue...” (128). The following day, instead of grieving as Ahn Joo expects, her father asks her to read a story. Patti Kim writes Ahn Joo's story as a colloquial reading from the pages with interrupting commentaries from her father and skipped pages. The piece is composed as an elliptical narrative comprising of a series of daisy-chained vignettes mostly about women, many of whom we've encountered through her father, who experience anxieties of the domestic.

The story offers a compelling vision of Korean diaspora constituted by migrations abroad, but also as alienations of home. It meticulously threads a cast of characters through multiple sites in Korea and the U.S. The geopolitical spaces of Korea/U.S. are organized as intersecting and indiscernible spaces under structures of power, which organize and exploit difference. Korea is not simplified to a descriptive encyclopedia entry emptied of its histories, instead, the piece summons the spectrality of U.S. presence in the country to theorize how

these journeys and migrations within the country and abroad shape aspirations and imaginations of home as an already elusive conceit. The narrative begins at schoolhouse in an agricultural village, where a teacher wakes a sleeping boy. Ahn Joo reads to her father, “If the teacher were to ask his students what they wanted to do when they were older, they would answer, either work as a clerk for the government or become a nurse, doctor, or teacher or live in America. Nobody wanted to be a farmer, potter, sea diver, fishmongers, or popcorn, fruit, rubber shoe seller like their mothers and fathers...” (135). These dreams for white-collar, professional lives in the city or its alternate, to live in America, are driven by a hunger for American consumer goods like Pond’s Cold Cream and cola.

While Ahn Joo never explicitly mentions the war in the narrative, these political and cultural shadows of a forgotten war appear surreptitiously in representations of Korea throughout the novel and in Ahn Joo’s stories. For example, earlier, her father’s imagination of the American dream is allegorized by a Korean family of their acquaintance who in spite coming from degenerate means in Korea including their grandmother who had prostituted herself to *black* serviceman, had become so rich they could afford a brick house in a first-ring suburb. This anecdote re-appears when Ahn Joo narrates the gendered terms of their ambitions. For men, their gendered mobility offers them a range of professional options that facilitates their move out of rural villages, but for women, becoming a typist or a copier in a government office is deemed as “impossible” compared to a more feasible project of marrying up and out to an “American man” (i.e. white) or “black man” in an army office. Black and American men surface as markings of U.S. military presence and portray its neocolonial status.<sup>24</sup>

Their presence in the story unfurls the narrative spatially. We glimpse into the lives of a series of women, all of whom are in the process of departing, abandoning, or in a state of exile from homes: from a rural rice farming village to a Buddhist monastery at the peak of the

One-Hundred-Year-Old Mountain to the bottom of the ocean near Cheju Island to a basement of a house in the U.S. and so forth. When the story pans from the scene of Cheju Island to the house in the U.S., the geographic shift isn't immediately evident:

“The mother finally had her son, but soon after the birth, she left her five children and husband to live on Cheju Island as a sea diver for oysters, clams, sea cucumbers, and worms. [...] Her children were forgotten in the sea. ‘From sea to shining sea’ were the words to an American song one woman had learned while living with an American man in the basement of a house owned by an elderly couple, who lived upstairs and constantly told her how beautiful her hair was.’ (139)

The unfinished narrative concludes with a vignette about two sisters both of whom initially enjoy a sweet romance with “American men” only to experience its violent dissipation. Ahn Joo only hints at their presence in the U.S. by relating how one sister had “returned to Korea to a remote village in a country and worked in a winehouse” (139). The sister’s shameful circumstance is mitigated by the rare promise of marriage for a woman of her status because she knew the words to her (assumed Korean) suitor’s favorite song—Paul Anka’s “Lonely Boy”: “I’m just a lonely boy, lonely and blue...” (139).

Identifying the gendered and sexual genealogies of Korean diasporas as represented through feminine figures such as the orphan-adoptee and the military/war brides critiques the homogenizing impetus of an ethnic and/or national formation such as “*the* Korean diaspora.”<sup>25</sup> It portrays diaspora as forged by the particularities of economic, gendered, sexual, ethnic, and racial formations. At the same time, scholars such as Yuh, Kim, and Cho focus on the figures of the female orphan-adoptee and the military-war brides connote how diaspora as transgenerational are re/produced and transmitted through memories of the feminine. Even more compellingly, these women as figures of private shame and the public promise of U.S. neocolonialism are simultaneously cast as un-reproductive of the nation, yet reproductive of its trauma. To this end, how do we make the traumas of diaspora productively reparative? I don’t mean to be dismissive of the lives of these women, but rather, to reorient diasporas

conditioned by traumatic memories towards less predictive futures, to something other than belonging.

The final scene portrays how returns to “homelands” do not guarantee “belonging.” Instead, the process of finding and making homes require taking on practical measures that contends with “the social regulation of ‘belonging.’” In circling back to the space of a rural village in its conclusion, the story troubles the proper narrative and spatial telos of migration as a unidirectional narrative that realizes closure through liberation from a past and settlement as a domestic subject.<sup>26</sup> The novel and Ahn Joo’s story explores the complex and uncertain outcomes that face Korean women who must manage the patriarchal and racist conditions that dictate the terms of their mobility both here and there. If aspirations for departure are related to projects of modernity under U.S. cultural imperialism, which was inherited from Japanese colonization, the “romance” forged by Paul Anka in this small rural village, portrays how the sister’s return is not to an original “homeland” as the legitimate place of belonging that promises restoration as a native subject and a home after leaving her “American man,” but instead, reckons with his romantic powers differently. For them, the condition of diaspora does not promise an alternative imagination of home and nation, but rather considers the discursive ways power operates to regulate gender and racial formations that are required to produce homes and nations and the fraught affects that guide their limited options and desires.

Ahn Joo’s retellings of her father’s own stories to him elicit an illness that manifests as lesions on his body. A doctor diagnoses the ailment as shingles, a disease caused by stress and fatigue, and to expect recovery within two weeks. Anne Anlin Cheng writes how “hypochondria” in Asian American literature is an effect of assimilation, and the externalization of racial otherness through dis-ease. According to Cheng, “Hypochondria is often staged in the texts...as a response to racism, not only from others but also from self: *an illness close to, and of home*” (my emphasis).<sup>27</sup> She adds later, “*Hypochondria is a way of perceiving the*



*world and one's body with respect to social relations*” (author’s emphasis).<sup>28</sup> Cheng reads this largely as a condition of second-generation Asian Americans, but this context revises this trope of hypochondria from a response to racism that realizes racial difference, to a racism that promises forgetting by entering new geopolitical borders and the narrative space of the American dream. Diasporas can be oriented around essentialized notions of home/lands, but as observed, those romances are conditioned by the discursive powers of the “American man” in order to maintain his myth of redemption and mobility as progress. For example, for her mother the inability “*to span the breach between what-is and what-ought-to-be...*” (109, author’s emphasis and ellipsis)—the failed promise of America to change the conditions of their refuge from patriarchal violence—results in her nostalgias for Korea. But for her father, once he agrees to the contract of the American dream, it legitimates his forgetting in becoming a propertied citizen-subject. At the same time, her father’s illness is a metaphor for diaspora as gendered embodiments of the conditions of migration—it traces the genealogies of un/belonging that constitute our multiplicity of subjectivities, one which we cannot absolve by naming new homes.

Ahn Joo is convinced the illness is aggravated by deflections of anguish and rage towards his dead father, who she saw as “haunting” him. Her prognosis for his recuperation would require him to publicly confess his grief to the attending doctor and nurses. For Ahn Joo, closures to her father’s pasts are requisite in summoning her lost mother and brother, who are neither dead nor alive, in the U.S. or in Korea. The inability to verify the state of her “origins” symbolizes her own existence as in limbo. But those prospects to confess and fully know what is true—why her grandfather was abusive to her father or why her mother left *her* (compared to her father)—become nil when her father discloses a different truth. She explains, “[M]y father, in his stupor, had confessed that the mother who had left me, and whom I had waited and longed for, was not mine” (143). In spite of her sophisticated reimaginings of

Korea and home, the surprising revelation empties all determinate associations and reconfigures her own relationship to “Korea” that she imagined through the feminine and maternal. The disclosure is foreshadowed by a nosy Korean grandmother that lives next door, who is convinced that Ahn Joo is not really Korean.

At the end, the novel defies against redemptive closures of truth by origin and contends, as Ahn Joo’s story suggests, her subjectivity as a Korean-American woman gains legibility through discourses of race, gender, and sexuality located in geopolitical, institutional, and familial spaces and its constitutive knowledges. In suggesting that identities and belongings are discursive, the novel goes on to explore the reparative power of acknowledging the inexplicability of the unknown—the sensation that truths are irrecoverable. Jigna Desai writes, “[D]iasporas, like nations, evoke a time of belonging and wholeness, the moment when the diasporic subject was neither fragmented nor disenfranchised. Narratives of exile, like classical discourses of diaspora, often privilege an originally and authentic nation as home. They are fecund in producing compensatory and fantastic imaginings that result from loss and authenticity.”<sup>29</sup> Diasporas do not reconstitute an original home or self, or help us narrate one.

### **III. Homing in Reparative Diasporas**

At the end, Ahn Joo is estranged from the possibility of any kind of reconciliation: familial unity and its attendant normalcies of home and identity. In the last chapter, the narrative shifts to second-person as Ahn Joo addresses her father, who is actively undermining her impending exit from the house. The novel disrupts dominant representations of transgenerational transmission through the talk-story trope between Asian American mothers to daughters prevalent in Asian American cultural paradigms.<sup>30</sup> Instead, in reconstituting the relationship as father/daughter, the novel disrupts the transgenerational feminine trope. (This is further emphasized through the very ambiguous suggestion that her father might not be her biological father.) In addition, the novel actively queries how affiliations and acts of belonging

and collectivity do not require houses and their alignments to homes and nations to accommodate belonging. Instead, they are composed through stories, knowledges, histories, and memories—fictive and non-fictive. Ahn Joo seems to find this possibility a necessary alternative to the house that her father had crafted and renovated, but is still unable to call it home. She narrates, “As I waited for the water to boil, I shut my eyes tight. But the mahogany bookcase you built when I entered college [...] the hardwood floors you laid in the living room, and the oyster white kitchen walls you painted stared at me, even behind my closed lids. I could let the water boil and all this wood go up in flames” (153–4). The house is disposable to her—a sign of confinement to her father, but also the normative structures of family, belonging, and identity.

This sentiment is put in relation to both her desires to have truth about her mother or “origins,” which are foreclosed by her father’s silence around the matter and also her ability to vocalize such pleas: “Why don’t you tell me the truth? Is she my mother or isn’t she? How else could she have left me? Why don’t you just tell me the truth?” (151). Unable to verify the “truth” about her mother, she internally catalogues stories her father has imparted, and the other things she now “knows” and has “seen.” In an internal monologue she states, “Miryang. Miryang. Miryang. I know. That was the village you grew up in.... [...] I know about the tree that stood next to the well. [...] I’ve already seen the soybean woman rolling her cart along the dirt road. [...] I know about how he broke your watch...” (150). For her father, the transmission of these stories seems to offer the relief of forgetting that facilitates a future (i.e. Miryang). Yet, such sentiments are contradicted by his repeating of the same narratives to ensure Ahn Joo has remembered them and his subsequent desire to hear and embellish her versions of them.<sup>31</sup>

Her father’s forgetting can be read as a tactic that stands in tension to prescriptive ways to remember just as Ahn Joo’s rewriting the past stands in tension to the present and future. I

borrow the generous and nurturing concept of the “reparative” from Eve Sedgwick to help theorize the past as not always predictive and anticipatory of the kinds of futures we can have or dream about. She uses the “reparative” as a nurturing affective measure to accompany methodologies of the “paranoid,” which depends on experiencing the satisfaction of having already anticipating what is now known. She writes:

To recognize in paranoia a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise, is also to glimpse the lineaments of other possibilities. [...] To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (author’s emphasis)<sup>32</sup>

Under paranoia, the desire to reduce truth from knowledges as it is already known offers satisfaction and redemption that is individualizing, it also ensnares us into a panoptic mode of discipline. Approaching knowledges from its accompanying perspectives of the reparative installs the possibilities of a future as not predetermined and transgressive (compared to transcendent) of its pasts. It can “repair” (not just save or repossess as implied in definitions of redemption) history and its present presence by experiencing the collective social practice of making stories and selves as Sedgwick might describe, “contingent developments,” which engenders the anxious vulnerability attendant to the sensations of possibility.

Storytelling in the novel is a significant metaphor for the condition of the paranoid and its tractions through practices of the reparative.<sup>33</sup> Like Eric Liu, who uses memoir and writing to authorize certain narratives to legitimize his identity, on one hand, we can read Ahn Joo’s storytelling as an impulse of the paranoid to reproduce origins and truths for the purposes of legitimizing her identity. But her storytelling never confirm her maternal origins, nor do they

validate what she wants to know. Her narratives—her palm reading venture, her offers to grant her an aunt that she has never met “redemption” by writing a story drawn from “*her* memory and *imagination*,” and even “The Voice of My Mother”—all register her constitutive engagements of the social from her readings, to the medium, content, and aesthetic of her narratives and these practices always forge unexpected transformations. For example, “the weird, the dark, and the depressing” surfaces as an important methodology to engage rather than reprove what seems like incognizant and inconceivable approaches to “home.”

Their mutually constituted uneasy relationships to the domestic and the maternal portrays how houses and histories—made up or real—do not authenticate old origins nor engineer new roots that promises ascertained futures. Instead, it continuously repositions their contingencies towards multiple possibilities. Sedgwick notes the relationship of paranoia and its heteronormative temporal and, I will add, spatial narrative reproductions. She writes, “The dogged, defensive narrative stiffness of a paranoid temporality, after all, in which yesterday can’t be allowed to have differed from today and tomorrow must be even more so, takes its shape from a generational narrative that’s characterized by a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness: it happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is happening to me.”<sup>34</sup> Such narratives can propose new outcomes when looking at the “queer possibilities,” which remind us “that our generational relations don’t always proceed in this lockstep” (147). In this regard, her father’s forgetting, which occurs in tandem through his talk-stories, are a “contingency” that circumvents, but also reconceives transgenerational rehearsals of violence and its anxieties of the domestic as masculine rather than feminine.

This is evident in Ahn Joo’s final story. In the novel’s closing, Ahn Joo approaches her father with tea, who waits in anticipation to hear “something important.” Unable to articulate her leaving, she wants to tell her father that she needs to hear the folk tale about the “princess-weaver and her lover, the cowherder,” or that she had “written a story about [her father’s] first

visit to [his] grandfather's grave" (155). Considering Ahn Joo's desire for her father to find deliverance from his own father's death, it is curious that this is about her father paying respects to his grandfather with offerings of fake pink azaleas, *soju*, and a banana. But it becomes clear that the story is about "deliverances" of a different sort, not based in its connotations of freedom and rescue, which are often predicated through confessional energies. Instead, taking on a reparative practice, the story "entertains [a] profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened different from the way it actually did" (146). Ahn Joo narrates, "[O]n your way out, your thinking about how your grandfather died. About how your father never took him to the hospital. If they had opened his stomach, they would have seen the disease, and he would have lived another year. I wanted to tell you that I had gotten everything down" (155). The abuses of her grandfather, her father's father, are not only inflicted upon his wives and children, but also in the devaluation of the life of his own father. As such, the narrative consults the present and its futures differently for both Ahn Joo and her father by signifying the patriarchal violence and abusive as not an inevitable transgenerational condition. Her declaration at the end of the quoted passage, which also appears near the start of the paragraph, demonstrates her assurance of bearing witness to such claims and archiving its knowledges

In explaining the rest of the story, she states, "[I] ended the story with you walking past the two women, leaving the graveyard, and thinking about how you didn't have enough *wons* to buy the dog soup at the end of the road" (156). The story's end refuses satisfactions of closure suggesting that "getting everything down" does not mean representations of shared knowledges are revelatory and thus finite. Instead, they confer an array of directions even in their limitations (i.e. "didn't have enough *wons* to buy dog soup"). But these stories are not exchanged, and the novel's end emulates the indeterminacy of Ahn Joo's narratives, as she finally articulates in Korean, "*Abba, I can't stay here any longer.*" Followed by, "[I] 'm sorry"

(author's emphasis 156). The novel forgoes grandstanding finality that reveals the truth of her origins or effusive sentimental goodbyes as her father deters formal acknowledgements of her departure instead stating, "*It's all right. I'm not going to die from the heat,*" and asks her to "*leave the tea when you go.*" In the last line of the book, Ahn Joo echoes his understatement with, "*I know.*" All that is left unspoken simultaneously retracts the seemingly conclusive remark. The sentiment of "I know" articulates the necessity of the inexplicable as defining our sense of belonging and its futures.

Like most of her stories, the distinctions between what her father has told her and her own embellishments are imperceptible, proposing the things recorded are not about confirming truths. These stories are spliced as competing and aligned narratives that are disruptive to the presumed inheritances of family. These cultural productions by father and daughter emerge to conceptualize a reparative diaspora that structures their relationship conceptually (not biologically) as a family and as Korean/Americans. It produces formations of un/belonging that refigures the traumas of exclusion, migration, and domesticity towards unexpected futures.

In this regard, it complements the constraints of paranoia and its methodologies of exposure and transparency that are used to support the kinds of lives that are available as already predetermined. Her father cannot offer Ahn Joo a home by purchasing a house and forgetting the past, and collecting his stories do not authorize any truths of her origins that also promises a family. Instead, *A Cab Called Reliable* imagines futures of unbelonging that are not anchored in houses or even its homes, and are irreproducible by families. These relationships are, instead, sustained by stories, memories, and its cultural practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Patti Kim, *A Cab Called Reliable* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Also, Roderick Ferguson writes, “While capital can only reproduce itself by ultimately transgressing the boundaries of neighborhood, home, and region, the state positions itself as the protector of these boundaries” (17). In Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Jigna Desai for this phrasing.

<sup>4</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 180.

<sup>5</sup> Grace Cho defines Korean diaspora: “The Korean diaspora in the United States has been haunted by the traumatic effects of what we are not allowed to know—the terror and devastation inflicted by the Korean War, the failure to resolve it, and the multiple silences surrounding this violent history. But it is not enough to say that the diaspora is transgenerationally haunted by the unspoken traumas of war; it is constituted by that haunting. If the historical condition of possibility for Korean diaspora is the Forgotten War, the psychic condition is that of enforced forgetting. The acknowledgment of a traumatic past is systematically disavowed by a matrix of silence, the major components of which include the institutions of U.S. global hegemony and social scientific knowledge production, along with the more intimate forces of familial desire and shame. The result for the Korean diaspora in the United States is that one is often an unwitting participant in one’s own erasure. But by the same token, the act of disavowal often proliferates the very trauma that is being denied” (12–3). In *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> While Jodi Kim does not explicitly engage the concept of diaspora, she notes how memories of the Korean War have “been transgenerationally seared into the memories of Koreans and Korean Americans” (145). In *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Ji-Yeon Yuh, “Moved by War: Migration, Diaspora and the Korean War,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.3 (Oct 2005): 281. Catherine Ceniza Choy also points out migration of Filipino nurses to the U.S. were not only produced by aspirations for economic ascendancy, but also driven an array of sentiments and desires. See *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Yuh, “Moved by War,” 287.

<sup>9</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Yuh, “Moved by War,” 289.

<sup>11</sup> Jigna Desai, “Bollywood, USA: Diasporas, Nations, and the State of Cinema,” in *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neodiaspora*, ed. Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 346.

<sup>12</sup> Here I adapt Kandice Chuh’s theorization of transnational: “a conceptual displacement of a national imaginary... allow[s] for discursive and critical acknowledgment of those political and cultural practices illegible in the official discourse of the U.S. nation-state” (62). Kang demonstrates the “enfigurations” of Asian/American women offers “critical insights into the changing and often contradictory understandings of those social and ontological categorizations across different epistemological frameworks. Holding the dissonance and resonance of these overlapping discourses in persistent tension can further enable a critical reenvisioning of their specifically disciplined modes of knowledge construction and representation” (22). In her book, Kang highlights Asian/American women as “compositional subjects” continuously exceed the disciplinary confines of knowledge, and its representational protocols of nation-based formations of identity. We might say that Asian/American women as compositional subjects often emerge as transnational compositions. In Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Laura Hyun-Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 180.

<sup>14</sup> See Desai, “Homesickness and Motion Sickness: Embodied Migratory Subjectivities in Gurinder Chadha’s *Bhaji on the Beach*” in *Beyond Bollywood*, 133–158. David Eng offers a related critique of how claims to heteronormative formations of Asian American masculine identity in cultural nationalist politics have depended on the linking of “the domestic space of the nation-state as a naturalized function of compulsory heterosexuality” (210). In observing such vexed confluences of the public (i.e. nation-state, masculine) and private (i.e. home, feminine) realms of the domestic for subjects who are marked by racial, gender, and sexual differences, Eng considers how a queer and diasporic framing of the domestic can denaturalize its assumptions as intrinsically heterosexual. In *Racial Castrations: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> JeeYeun Lee, “Toward a Queer Korean American Diaspora,” in *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998), 194.



<sup>17</sup> Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 180.

<sup>18</sup> Lee, "Toward a Queer Korean American Diaspora," 200–1.

<sup>19</sup> Lee, "Toward a Queer Korean American Diaspora," 204, my emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 192.

<sup>21</sup> This is further highlighted in the definition of "belong" in the *New Oxford English Dictionary*, which depends on the word "right" or a sense of appropriateness to characterize the place and placement of a person or thing. It states, "(of a thing) fit in a specified place or environment..."; "(of a person) fit in a specified place or environment"; have the right personal or social qualities to be a member of a particular group."

<sup>22</sup> Desai writes, "[D]iaspora provides a critique not only of the concept of home but also of origins and the role they play in conceptualizations of nation, race, and identity. Hence...diaspora functions as a postnational critique of the nation and nationalism that is strongly associated with a critique of the concept-metaphor of home and origin" (18). In *Beyond Bollywood*.

<sup>23</sup> Kang, *Compositional Subjects*, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Chungmoo Choi writes: "[A]merican mass culture towered over Korea's desolate cultural landscape as South Korea became one of the most heavily armed fortresses of the vast American empire. To live in this state of internal displacement and external dependency is to live in a state of colonialism. [...] It cannot be confined to the arena of economics that neocolonialism often connotes. It is a colonization of consciousness, which results in a broad range of cultural expression, values, and behavior and the production of knowledge in an environment of tremendous material and cultural disparity" (464–5). In "The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke UP, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> In some ways, Jodi Kim's reading of Susan Choi's *The Foreign Student* and Heinz Insu Fenkl's *Memoires of My Ghost Brother* provide some glimpses into this possibility as well. In "The Forgotten War: Korean America's Conditions of Possibility," *Ends of Empire*, 143–192

<sup>26</sup> In *Imagine Otherwise*, Chuh offers a similar reading of the conclusion of Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*. The novel's protagonist Doc Hata, like his adoptive daughter Sunny, both understand the power of never belonging, never fitting and the deep ambiguity of self that arises with those feelings, but at the same time, as Hata comes to that bittersweet sentiment lends a freedom otherwise unavailable and it is this unmoored notion of home that he embraces at the novel's end. Lee writes:

"Perhaps I'll travel to where Sunny wouldn't go, to the south and west and maybe farther still, across the oceans, to land on former shores. But I think it won't be any kind of pilgrimage. I won't be seeking out my destiny or fate. I won't attempt to find comfort in the visage of a creator or the forgiving dead. Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle around and arrive again. Come almost home" (355–6). See Chuh, "'One Hundred Percent Korean': On Space and Subjectivity," in *Imagine Otherwise*, 85–111.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 68.

<sup>28</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> Desai, *Beyond Bollywood*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is the paradigmatic Asian American text that emblemizes the Asian American mother-daughter talk-story trope. It also bears many striking similarities to *A Cab Called Reliable*. They share narratives of the paternal aunt, rejections of another Asian American girl at her school, the protagonists' identifications to disabled boys, and practices of storytelling. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage, [1976] 1989).

<sup>31</sup> On one hand, her father is concerned for the ways Ahn Joo adapts his stories telling her "That's not how true," but also encourages embellishing with violence and an eye towards American tastes to "sell" (146).

<sup>32</sup> I thank Christine Balance for introducing me to this essay, and Joyce Mariano for helping me think through the distinctions between redemption and reparation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 146.

<sup>33</sup> Sedgwick writes, "The very mention of [Ronald Firkbank, Djuna Barnes, Joseph Cornell, Kenneth Anger, Charles Ludlam, Jack Smith, John Waters, and Holly Hughes], some of them attaching to almost legendarily 'paranoid' personalities, confirms too, Klein's insistence that it is not people but mutable positions—or, I would want to say, practices—that can be divided between the paranoid and the reparative; it is sometimes

the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices” (150). In Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading.”

<sup>34</sup> Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 147.

### Chapter Three

#### “The *right* to be whoever the hell they want to be”: *Better Luck Tomorrow* and Asian American Cultural Politics of Normal

There is an uneasy moment of déjà vu near the conclusion of *Better Luck Tomorrow*<sup>1</sup>, Justin Lin’s 2002 film about overachieving Asian American male teenagers, who excel in the classroom and crookedness. In a dim garage, the film’s protagonist, Ben Manibag, an earnest and straight-laced high schooler, begins to repeatedly strike his nemesis, Steve, a well-heeled prep school boy, with an aluminum baseball bat. The scene of Asian-on-Asian violence is disturbing and haunting, bearing resemblance to the June 19, 1982, racially-motivated murder of Vincent Chin, who was bludgeoned with a baseball bat by a white autoworker in Detroit. I contend this strange re-enactment twenty-one years later from a scene of interracial violence to *intra*racial violence dramatizes the shifts in Asian American cultural politics and its petitions for rights and recognitions as Americans to “normal.”<sup>2</sup>

My purpose is not to diminish the circumstances that contributed to the tragic end of Chin’s short life in noting this comparison, but rather to analyze the historical, cultural, and political shifts to explore the complicated relationship between Asian American cinema and representational politics that surface with desires for visibility, recognition, and legitimacy from the 1980s and to the early 2000s. The release of *Better Luck Tomorrow* in the Hollywood-endorsed Cineplex was touted by activists and critics as a vanguard moment in Asian American cinema history departing from pedantic identity narratives often associated with civil rights and national liberation activisms. Rather than reading *Better Luck Tomorrow*’s validations of mainstream popular culture as a “break,” I analyze activisms and discourses that transpired from the Vincent Chin murder and *Better Luck Tomorrow* to illustrate the relationship between civil rights politics of equality

and Asian American cultural politics of normal are oriented by representations of masculinity and violence.

While scholarship in African American and queer studies help us understand American and normal as mutually constitutive euphemisms for liberal individualism, this distinction emerges in debates in Asian American representational politics to resolve the contradictions of U.S. citizenship and American nationality for Asians in the U.S. especially against the figure of the immigrant-foreigner. African American culture is racialized as nonnormative and pathological against bourgeois whiteness and essentialized notions of Asian/American culture, yet African Americans racially, historically, and culturally are central to the American imagination and its national identity.<sup>3</sup> Comparatively, the racialization of Asians in the U.S. as immigrant-foreigners shapes them as alien to American nationality, but triangulates them as proximate to white American norms and against black culture vis-à-vis their imported cultural values and standing as model minority.<sup>4</sup>

Narrating the transformation of Asians in the U.S. from the Asian immigrant to American is crucial to national subjectivity, and its recognitions. Formations of national identity are produced in affirmation of, but also in dissent to its normative ideals. Dissent is an integral part of these processes, and the very concept of “American” is imbued with different meanings to motivate agendas in American culture and politics as well as Asian American activism and identity. For example, the murder of Vincent Chin occurred during a time of economic instability that scapegoated Japan as a foreign threat to (white) American livelihoods. The anxieties of white heteronationalism propelled associations of Asian Americans with import cars that were constructed as corrosive to the ideals of American capitalism and white working-class labor. In response, activists mobilizing a civil rights case in Chin’s name attempted to expand the national imaginary by representing themselves as U.S. citizens and politically

American. The failures to indict Chin's murderers in the civil rights trial revealed the conditional terms Asians in the U.S. receive validation as Americans.

*Better Luck Tomorrow* and its attendant discourses portray the limitations of state-based recognitions emblemized by the civil rights trial of the Vincent Chin murder, and turns towards the market as the privileged site for petitions for recognition and legitimacy as consumers. Claiming normal is constructed as radical in the extradiegetic discourses of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, but I conclude that normal derives out of the heteropatriarchal genealogy of citizenship and rights, and depends on recognitions and legitimacies of an Asian American masculinity through scenes of violence. To provide some clarification of terms, "normal" and "normativity" are expressions of neoliberalism's rearrangements of difference as "nonpolitical politics" for mainstream legitimacy. I use "normal" to describe its appeals in Asian American cultural politics as a fictive site of equality, inclusion, and individualism. "Normativity" is the critical diction that names its limitations.

Normal takes shape in many different forms and agendas, but I argue normal is allegorized by the elision of the Asian immigrant to suppress the particularities of difference that inform Asian American racial formations as nonnormative and alternate to the national body. Normal constructs Asians in the U.S. as Asian *Americans*, but in contempt of the state, its laws, and its ideals. The (Asian) American citizen and the immigrant is a coterminous figure supporting America's master narratives of assimilation, the American dream, and its ideals. But is also the source of America's xenophobic anxieties. The figure of the Asian immigrant becomes American, but at the same time, its persistent racialization as the Asian immigrant suspends him from being American. As we will examine in through the Vincent Chin case, the figure of the Asian immigrant is what obstructs the possibilities for recognition and legitimacy as American. Normal imagines the Asian American as an atemporal and ethnic-less figure hewed from its associations with the immigrant.

This chapter pays specific attention to cinema as a valued space of engagement for Asian American cultural politics and activism. It examines how these political changes are reflected in Asian American cinematic practices. I investigate these shifts from the radical idealism and experimentation of the 1960s and 70s into its pragmatism, institutionalization, and embrace of the mainstream beginning in the 1980s and into the contemporary moment. Beginning in the 1980s, institutional support and legitimacy for Asian American cinematic practices resulted in the suppression of heterogeneous forms of subversive cultural expressions, and contributed to the segregation and consolidation of Asian American cinema to its dominant understanding as ideological tropes of “ethnic explaining” or “becoming American.” In looking at this history, I examine the limitations of “the mainstream” out of pessimism and misgivings about its possibilities as well as my naïve optimism in the alterity of Asian American cinematic practices, which are also not without its unruly contradictions. In desiring legitimate visibility from Hollywood, mainstream, corporations, the government, we can observe how the unevenly amateur and innovative impulses for complexity and alterity are suppressed by these sites to validate the dominance of the legible and reinforce the known.

### **I. Asian American Cinema and the Problem of “Ethnic Explaining”**

In the contemporary moment, representations of Asian Americans that speak fluent English and perform all the perfunctory mannerisms of what is seen as American is perceived as a positive direction in mainstream popular culture. On film, we see John Cho and Kal Penn carry their blockbuster hit *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* and actors Sandra Oh, Tim Kang, and Ken Leung starring in primetime television hits such as *Grey’s Anatomy*, *The Mentalist*, and *Lost*. These representations are heralded for their portrayals of Asian Americans living normal lives. In the case of Harold and Kumar, normal means that, as Asian American men, they upset the gendered and sexualized expectations of their race. They have non-Asian girlfriends,<sup>5</sup> speak English with American accents, act like underachieving stoners, and are

interested in having lots of heterosexual intercourse. Phil Yu, the writer of *Angry Asian Man*, a popular blog on Asian American cultural politics, describes them as “a revolutionary portrayal of Asian-American men, shown as regular, everyday guys. [...] They’re not perfect, and far from noble, but you’re rooting for them. And you have this revolutionary package in a stoner movie, complete with fart jokes and boob jokes.”<sup>6</sup> Normal means the absence of narrative cues regarding their racial embodiments. As *Grey’s Anatomy*’s Christina Kim is likely to remind us, “I’m Jewish”—juxtaposing her racial exterior with a seemingly mismatched cultural interior.

*Better Luck Tomorrow*’s significance is marked by two mutually constitutive accomplishments: the film’s “revolutionary” representations of Asian American masculinity, which ushered many of these normal representations of Asian Americans; and, its small yet lucrative distribution deal with MTV Films, a brand aligned with the profitable 18 to 35 demographic, which put the first, almost exclusively male, Asian American cast in a Hollywood-endorsed cinema marquee.<sup>7</sup> The film’s male characters and violent narrative subverted common on-screen portrayals of Asian American men, who normally occupy the roles of asexual kung-fu experts, effeminate Chinese food delivery boys or ethnographic documentary subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, a much-publicized debate at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival following a screening of the film allegorized the enduring limitations of the public in accepting unfamiliar images of Asian American men. When a white male audience member asked Lin why he chose to portray his Asian American characters as “amoral” and “nihilistic,” renowned *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert provided the critical authority to intervene on Lin’s behalf and initiate the film’s very public reception in the media by stating:

I was on a panel with Chris Eyre, the Native American director, and he said that for along time his people, American Indians, had always had to play some kind of a function, like they were the source of spirituality. And what I find very offensive and condescending about your statement is nobody would say to a bunch of white filmmakers, ‘How could you do this to your people? *This film has the right to be about these people, and Asian American characters have the right to*

*be whoever the hell they want to be. They do not have to represent their people.*<sup>9</sup> (my emphasis)

In articulating how the limited economy of culturally sanctioned images for non-white racial subjects positioned them to purpose a narrative function, Ebert elicited a rabble-rousing ovation but also illustrated the paradoxes of such responsibilities: “to be about these people” and also “not hav[ing] to represent their people.” These sentiments translated in press and media coverage that circulated around the film, which used words like normal/flawed, universal/three-dimensional, complex/ordinary and even, positive reflecting the ironic representational aspirations of Asian American men. For Lin, these contradictory sentiments are expressive of his agenda to portray the realness of his characters—showing Asian American men, as he states in another paradox, “guys trying to be guys.”<sup>10</sup>

This artistic agenda coincides with a market strategy to make these images universally consumable. On a National Public Radio interview with host Neil Cohen, Lin responds to Cohen’s remark, “[I]t seems to matter less [the characters are] Chinese<sup>11</sup> or Asian-American than they’re suburban kids,” by stating, “I think it’s very universal. You know, I think everyone can relate to it.... [I]t does deal with identity and it does have an Asian-American male perspective, but it’s not necessarily a specific Asian-American...experience.”<sup>12</sup> While the film was marketed to “mainstream audiences,” Lin’s reception in Hollywood ironically depended on proving the existence of a specific constituency: Asian American consumers.

Until recently, Asian Americans have been often conflated with whites in research on spending practices and consumer tastes. Lin describes a meeting with MTV marketing executives for *Better Luck Tomorrow*, and noticing the glaring absence of Asian Americans in their data. He recounts, “They told me that they know Asian-Americans exist and they know they go the movies but their spending habits are exactly the same as middle-class whites, so they consider them Caucasian. [...] But the thing is, there’s never been a film to track Asian-American spending habits. So we’re hoping this movie will get us slice of the pie.”<sup>13</sup> In her



ethnographic study on the marketing of Latinos in the U.S., Arlene Dávila suggests the construct of the Latino marketing demographic depends on illustrating them “as a foreign rather than intrinsic component of U.S. society, culture, and history, suggesting that the growing visibility of Latino populations parallels an expansion of the technologies that render them exotic and invisible.”<sup>14</sup> Comparatively, the discourses around *Better Luck Tomorrow* portray how the designation of a separate Asian American marketing demographic was also about representing Asians in the U.S. as both a racial minority and American.<sup>15</sup>

While MTV Films purchased the project for a relatively small sum of \$50,000 for distribution rights, little money was invested towards the PR and marketing of the film. Lin along with the producers conscripted the support of Asian American organizations, media activists, and college students, who advocated for the film’s success through guerilla marketing campaigns in hopes of bolstering the numbers at the box office.<sup>16</sup> The hard work paid off, surprising media analysts with record-breaking figures in its vital opening weekend numbers, pulling \$400,000 in a limited run of thirteen theaters in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and the Bay Area.<sup>17</sup> Asian American audiences constituted about 60 percent of the seats, highlighting the potential of their spending power. The film’s tremendous success paved new avenues for citizenship as consumers. Dávila notes how uncritical desires to champion cultural citizenship through marketing pie as corollary to political enfranchisement and its rights is “an intrinsic component of how states organize and manage difference, a medium for normalization through the accommodation of difference.”<sup>18</sup>

These representations of Asian American men as guys and its mainstream aspirations encompass what I call an Asian American representational politics of normal. *Better Luck Tomorrow* relies on discourses of normal to mark its significance in Asian American cinema. Rather than seeing this as a break from prevailing notions of “Asian American cinema,” often claimed to be exemplified by PBS documentaries and identity narratives, representational

politics of normal is a discursive shift from the civil rights activism of the 80s emblemized by the murder of Vincent Chin. Asian American representational politics and its petitions for recognition and legitimacy as national subjects as citizens and consumers are contingent upon the discursive legibility of Asian American men and their normative masculinity. Normative masculinity is apprehended through representations of violence that transform Asian American differences into a racial category rather than ethnic.

Renee Tajima observes that in the mid-1980s, Asian American filmmaking departed from a practice developed by “artists-activists-scholars” in the late 1960s who were interested in “fus[ing] work with social meaning and a grounding in community life.”<sup>19</sup> Tajima suggests that these artists privileged politics over art, content over form. Jun Okada intervenes this popular assumption by explaining how this sensibility defined West Coast filmmakers, but in New York, Asian American filmmakers saw artistic practice as contingent to a radical politics.<sup>20</sup> These conflicting objectives and ideals portray the heterogeneous formations of Asian American cultural movements, which shared a vision of Asian American cultural practices as an antidote to the hegemony of American politics and mainstream popular cultures. Asian American artists such as Frank Chin, Kathleen Chang, Janice Tanaka, Bruce and Norman Yamamoto, and Yoko Ono<sup>21</sup> experimented by transgressing disciplinary boundaries dividing genre/ medium, content/form, and artists/curators/audiences through narrative, aesthetic, and political modes of dissent. Their works theorize the structural inequalities and innovative possibilities that emanate out of difference that remain relevant and effective today. Far from a unified political voice, these artistic practices emerged out of philosophy of collaborations oriented by healthy debate and disagreement—sometimes to their detriment.<sup>22</sup>

This seemingly heterogeneous era related artistic exploration, material critique, and politics as mutually constitutive practices were interrupted by what Glenn Omatsu calls the “devastating corporate offensive of the mid-1970s” and what Lisa Duggan calls a culture of

“upward redistribution,”<sup>23</sup> which curtailed the idealism of radical and progressive politics. In the early 1970s, the declining American economy was attributed to shrinking corporate profits and the increasing wages of the working and middle class. Moreover, civil rights initiatives and affirmative action policies restructuring institutional inequalities were construed as generating “too much democracy.” To mitigate the social and economic tensions, Reagan administration expanded corporate influence through federal deregulation policies, which contributed to the proliferation of big businesses and tax cuts for the wealthy and the hypervisibility of those livelihoods (i.e. welfare queen, Indochinese refugee) who were deemed as benefiting from welfare and government resources. The reduction of civic programs such as welfare, education, and arts contributed to investments in liberal multiculturalism to ameliorate the “racial realignment.” Projects of liberal multiculturalism exploited racial, gender, and sexual differences to organize public discourses around racial and ethnic difference as aesthetically American, culturally consumable, historically disparate, and politically empty.<sup>24</sup>

We can periodize the representational politics of normal, which I see allegorized by *Better Luck Tomorrow*, as a production of the racial realignment under 1980s liberal multiculturalism, which parsed categories of race, gender, and sexuality into hierarchical and isolated categories of identity for legibility and visibility. Discourses of multiculturalism converged with what Glen Mimura refers to as “an Americanist rhetoric,” which privileged representing Asians in the U.S. as Americans, exemplified by activism around reparations for Japanese internment as well as the murder of Vincent Chin.<sup>25</sup> These petitions for national subjectivity operated against the looming effects of America’s military presence in Asia, anxieties of new immigrants following the repeals of anti-Asian immigration laws, and representations of Japan’s threatening economic power. Mimura notes the ironic investments of the reparation movement taking up “the rhetoric of official nationalism” to challenge the state in taking accountability for the “betrayal of its own principles.”<sup>26</sup> Grassroots organizing

shifted to navigate the bureaucracies of institutions and the state optimized a politics of visibility that would legitimize the place of subordinated groups by representing them as Americans rather than attending to material and structural barriers.

Tajima describes the effects of these interrelated cultural, economic, and political shifts in the “second stage” of Asian American filmmaking:

This second stage, throughout the 1980s, was a period of institutionalization, pragmatism, and skills attainment, as filmmakers focused their sights on a mass audience. The tenor of the work was determined to a degree by the marketplace, and the marketplace was public television, still the most viable outlet for Asian American films. [...] [I]n the midst of a dehomogenizing cultural shift, debate over notions of quality, art versus politics, content versus form, sharpened. Rather than to embrace this confusion, Asian American filmmakers tended to moderate it, taking tentative steps into narrative and feature filmmaking, paying more attention to our right or access than the meaning of access. (14)

Rather than embrace the “dehomogenizing cultural shift” of the times, Asian American cinematic practices transformed from key a political practice of experimentalism and abstraction to representation and reflection, focusing its attentions towards national and state recognitions as citizens and as consumers that were inspired by the 1950s and 60s civil rights rhetorics of rights and equality in contrast to cultural nationalism, national liberation, and third world feminisms’ critiques of the state. The institutionalization Asian American cinema through the development of media arts organizations, increased bureaucratization with financial support from federal, state, and city organizations, and attention to films for “mass audience” through public television and independent feature filmmaking contributed to the development of this new multicultural vision of America.<sup>27</sup>

The incorporation of Asian American cinema into public television signaled a moment of ambivalent promise for Asian American filmmakers and representations of Asians in the U.S. These investments in the state, and its cultural arm of public television reflected the most vocal and visible sentiments of Asian American cultural politics in the 1980s, which conceded to the possibilities of recognitions as Asian *Americans* as its goals. The excitement around the

institutionalization of Asian American film in exchange for visibility and representation are now burdens.<sup>28</sup> Asian American film critics and scholars contend “Asian American cinema” is entrenched in a political and creative myopia institutionalized by the Corporation of Public Broadcasting (CPB), and PBS, which maintain the Americanist rhetoric through tropes of ethnic explaining or becoming American. This brand of Asian American cinema is defined by a focus in themes of injury, history, and nationalism to appeal for recognitions as racial minorities, American citizens, and liberal individuals.

These sentiments are evident in early films supported by CPB and PBS, films such as Loni Ding’s *The Color of Honor* (1987), a documentary on the service of Japanese American soldiers in America’s fight in World War II and Christine Choy and Renee Tajima’s Academy Award-winning documentary, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*<sup>29</sup> (1988), are often cited as expressions of that political and cultural moment. The Americanist rhetoric takes up the possibilities of national recognition through legibility of Asian American heteromascularity like the representational politics of normal, but citizenship and American identity are contingent upon the authority of the state and its visual/narrative apparatuses to transform the Asian into Asian American, and then, American.

According to Okada, the “ideological purpose” of this racial vision of Asian America is epitomized by the national PBS series *P.O.V.*, and its programming which fall under two classifications of films: the “social historical documentary” (i.e. ideological) and “historical trauma” (i.e. becoming Asian/American), which perpetuate the exposure of injury as a central plot. She describes *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* as exemplary of *P.O.V.* programs and criticizes the film for instituting a “paradigmatic” definition of Asian American film.<sup>30</sup> *P.O.V.*’s curatorial and selection processes for its series homogenizes a diverse community by supporting films that feature injury to generate what political scientist Wendy Brown calls “the politics of *ressentiment*.”<sup>31</sup> Okada states the trope of “injury” is a product of public television’s

commodification of Asian American cinema, which privileges the violent wounds of discrimination and racism faced by Asian Americans. America's liberalism and its appeals for progress reintegrate the racially disenfranchised as renewed members of the national imaginary that mandated their exclusion. While these dogged tropes feel repetitive, I contend that the constructs of Asian American film as explaining or becoming are privileged narratives, *readings*, and marketing strategies of these films to verify Asian Americans as American in its various forms. These modes portray alignments to a politics of visibility that relies on the state for validation. These films do not simply reflect of these politics. For example, we can re-read the trope of explaining as anxieties around the inassimilability of Asian immigrant and its nonnormative gender and sexual formations, which operates to resolve contradictory narratives of the Asian immigrant through violence and injury.

In other words, depictions of violence and its injuries transform Asians in the U.S. as American. Brown's politics of resentment is also central to Linda Williams' concept of "racial melodrama," which as a mode of narrating race relations authorizes moral legibility that is sanctioned and resolved by the state and the popular imagination. Williams argues that American racial relationships are narrated through melodramas of black and white where racialized (i.e. black men) and gendered (i.e. white women) minorities are incorporated into the national imagination through the visibility of their wounds. The target of their subordination—their gendered and racial differences—is ascribed moral legibility and reconciled in the revelation of the humanity of their violated body. The process of moral legibility narrated by racial melodrama highlights and aesthetically incorporates racial and/or gender difference to represent the nation's liberal progress.<sup>32</sup> Williams writes, "Racial melodrama takes on enormous importance as the engine for the generation of legitimacy for racially constituted groups whose very claim to citizenship lies in these spectacles of pathos and action. Racial melodrama is the popular form that gives permission to these racially constituted groups to

carry out actions that they could not carry out in the name of bald self interest.”<sup>33</sup> Williams notes how the figure of Uncle Tom (from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) transformed the black subject from chattel to human, and during the civil rights movement, America was asked to recognize the black human as part of its citizenry.<sup>34</sup> The transformation from human to citizen was facilitated through representations of African American activists’ nonviolent resistance in engaging seemingly everyday acts: sitting at the front of the bus, drinking from a water fountain, attending school, and ordering at a lunch counter. The violent responses by white, southern authorities to discipline these passive resisters into their appropriate places “before the glare of the national media, especially the newly arrived medium of television”<sup>35</sup> issued the moral quandaries of Jim Crow, the complicity of the state, and white citizens.

The “ideology of injury” and its representations of racial bodies is intimately linked to the nascent medium of television and its channeling of black-and-white depictions of African Americans as the objects of individual and state-instituted violences. American audiences witnessed the unfolding melodramas and assessed their respective places in the nation. Coincidentally, television and, especially public television instituted in 1967 by President Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration under the auspices of being “the clearest expression of American diversity, and of excellence within diversity,”<sup>36</sup> offered to deliver a democratic vision of affective morality and liberalism into American homes. But the promise of diversity in its original tenets did not recognize race. Protests from media activists and producers finally registered with CPB in 1978, and in the early 80s lead to the formalization of the Minority Consortia. This organization served as “advocates and middle-men between minority filmmakers and PBS,”<sup>37</sup> and signaled the inclusion of racial minorities and their stories as a central component in PBS’ content development and programming. The National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA, now The Center for Asian American

Media) was designated as the Asian American service arm by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and PBS.

Representations of injury on PBS are a tactic of both exposure and acknowledgement of Asian Americans as racial minorities. For Asian Americans, these injuries largely coalesce around their confluences with the figure of the Asian immigrant, and the state, its laws, and cultures that construct the Asian American as alien and in negation to its citizenship and national belonging. Injury and its melodramatic mode has particular resonance in lending racial legibility for Asians in the U.S. as racial minorities and then citizens, but operates as a *continual* rehearsal to the state, and its national imagination—namely through the mode of “ethnic explaining.” The visibilities of their injuries or wounds do not have traction in the American imagination such as, and I do not say this glibly but to note the potency of its popular archive and its portfolio of iconic images, slavery or even the Rodney King trials comparatively to Japanese internment.

The shifts in American politics and the most vocal arenas of Asian American activism in the 1980s increasingly disassociated culture from politics, Asian American activists squared their appeals to the state and its laws for racial recognition of Asian Americans, and protection from the potential injuries of being seen as an Asian immigrant. Related, designated cultural spheres such as PBS, and its series *P.O.V.*, functioned as the authorized sites to reflect Asian Americans as subjects of racial difference to the national body, and to potentially embrace the Asian immigrant as Americans. Okada critiques “injury” in contributing to generic definitions of Asian American film, but the relationship between Asian American cultural practices and dominant discourses in Asian American activism and liberal multiculturalisms privilege injury as a method for national recognitions.

These narrative conventions complemented the strategies of Asian Americanist cultural politics to appeal to the state for recognitions as racial minorities, American citizens, and liberal



individuals Mimura writes how the Redress and Reparations movement depended on accounts and narratives of three key figures for their political project: “the eminently American, redemptive character of the selfless, loyal Japanese American soldiers; the actions of those who resisted in the camps or protested their constitutionality; and to a lesser degree, the experiences of the conscientiously objecting No-No Boys.”<sup>38</sup> In highlighting these three figures, violence against manhood plays a central role in the reconciliation of difference and national progress. The Japanese American soldier’s alignments with America are much more legible, not only for his military service, but his implied engagements as an enactor of violence in protecting the borders of his imagined community. To portray the mutually constitutive formations of normal and American as contingent upon a politics of visibility that depend on the discursive legibility of a normative Asian American male subject and its heteromascularity, I will offer an analysis of the murder and civil rights trial of Vincent Chin and the documentary, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*. The Vincent Chin case and its representations illustrate how Asian American recognitions for national subjectivity depend upon the converging discourses of visibility, representational politics, activism, and citizenship, which are mobilized through violence. Violence and its injuries become a central mode in which normative masculinity becomes legible upon the Asian American male body, and offers the possibility of inclusion into the national body.

## **II. Vincent Chin and the Re-Americanization of Asian America through Scenes of Interracial Violence**

In Asian American studies and politics, Vincent Chin is a potent symbol of anti-Asian violence and panethnic activism that converged in the 80s. The lenient sentencing of Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz for the death of Vincent Chin ignited a national Asian American movement seeking proper adjudication for Chin’s murder. The plea-bargained manslaughter charge, three years of probation and a fine of \$3,000 sentence fueled sentiments that Wayne County Judge Charles Kaufman’s decision inversely underscored the value of Chin’s life against

Ebens and Nitz's criminal act. This was exacerbated by the judge's statement, "These aren't the kind of men you send to jail. [...] You fit the punishment to the criminal not the crime."<sup>39</sup> The activism began as critique around the failures of the judicial system and its inequitable blindness for the victim and the criminals, and later, advocated for a civil rights investigation, which allegorized the transformation of Asians in the U.S. as Asian Americans and Americans by exercising their unalienable rights as citizens. Yet, these legal battles are reduced to the melodrama about race. Yen Le Espiritu's description of the murder of Vincent Chin in *Asian American Panethnicity* follows: "On the night of 19 June 1982, Vincent Chin, a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese American draftsman, stopped in a Detroit bar with three friends to celebrate Chin's upcoming wedding. While in the bar, Chin became involved in a fist fight with Ronald Ebens, a white Chrysler factory foreman."<sup>40</sup> Likewise in William Wei's *The Asian American Movement*, he writes, "On 19 June 1982, Vincent Chin, a young Chinese American draftsman, was killed by Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, both of whom were unemployed autoworkers. Before bludgeoning him to death with a baseball bat, they 'reviled Chin with obscenities and, believing him to be Japanese, allegedly blamed him for layoffs in the automobile industry'—a classic case of using Asians as scapegoats for the country's economic problems."<sup>41</sup> The accidental Asian, Eric Liu, writes, "[O]ne of the most powerful allegories in Asian American lore is the tale of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American beaten to death in 1982 by two laid-off white auto workers who took him to be Japanese. The Chin story tells of a lingering strain of vicious, indiscriminate racism that can erupt without warning."<sup>42</sup>

These descriptions of the murder from popular texts in Asian American studies highlight a narrative of interracial violence, obscuring its important intersections with the processes of gender and sexuality. Espiritu euphemizes the Fancy Pants, a strip club, where the violence originated and Wei focuses on the historic dimensions that contributed to Chin's murder. Liu's misinformed description pats it as the dangerous affects of racism. Helen Zia,

whose involvement with Asian American activism began with the case, elaborates upon the gendered and sexual dimensions of the scene, writes:

At the lounge, two white men sat across the striptease stage from Vincent and his three friends—two white men and one Chinese American. Ronald Ebens, plant superintendent for Chrysler, and his stepson, Michael Nitz, laid-off autoworker, soon made it clear that they found Vincent’s presence distasteful. The friends of the groom-to-be were paying the dancers handsomely to shower their favors on Vincent. According to witnesses, Ebens seemed annoyed by the attention the Chinese American was receiving from the nude dancers. Vincent’s friends overheard Ebens say ‘Chink,’ ‘Nip,’ and ‘fucker.’ One of the dancers heard him say, ‘It’s because motherfuckers like you that we’re out of work.’ Vincent replied, ‘Don’t call me a fucker,’ and a scuffle ensued. Nitz’s forehead was cut, possibly by a punch or a chair thrown by Vincent. Both groups were ejected from the bar. (59)

At the same time, Zia’s details of the racialized manifestations of gender and sexuality remains descriptive, and is used to demonstrate Ebens and Nitz’s perpetration of racism that nullified Chin of his citizenship (i.e. “because motherfuckers like you...”), and ended in his brutal death in a parking lot by a baseball bat.

Like the Reparation and Redress movements, which appropriated nationalist discourse, activism around the Chin case sought justice through a civil rights investigation, which required shaping Asians in the U.S. as Americans. Zia describes how Asian American community members and activists in Detroit gathered to strategize and organize a campaign to pursue justice for Chin’s murder. The group called themselves “American Citizens for Justice” (ACJ) after dismissing names like “Citizens for Fair Sentencing in the Cause of Vincent Chin” and “Chinese Americans for Justice” for being too limited in scope of their members and its mission. While the organization was described as multiracial, the organization’s name affirmed the need to represent the predominantly Asian organization as American, highlighting their legal and political *rights* to challenge the judicial system. Their statement of principles emphasized this goal:

1. All citizens are guaranteed the right to equal treatment by our judicial and governmental system.
2. When the rights of one individual are violated, all of society suffers.<sup>43</sup>

Their citizenship also depended on positioning themselves as racially Asian American, revising divisions of ethnic categorization. Yen Le Espiritu explains the significance of anti-Asian violence, which in being indiscriminant to Asian American differences, organizes pan-ethnic coalitional politics along the axis of racial difference.<sup>44</sup> Espiritu writes, “While political benefits certainly promote pan-Asian organization, it is anti-Asian violence that has drawn the largest pan-Asian support. Because the public does not usually distinguish among Asian subgroups, anti-Asian violence concerns the entire group—cross-cutting class, cultural, and generational divisions.”<sup>45</sup>

The use of “Asian American” privileges the political dimensions of their project as the final point of their organizational mission highlights: “Asian Americans, along with many other groups of people, have historically been given less than equal treatment by the American judicial and governmental system. Only through cooperative efforts with all people will society progress and be a better place for all citizens.”<sup>46</sup> At the same time, Zia recounts how organizing around race was met with apprehension, as members were wary of alienating whites and blacks by constructing themselves as racial minorities.<sup>47</sup> If dominant discourses of civil rights are organized around racial difference between blackness and whiteness, violence and its injurious effects offer Asians in the U.S. discursive legibility as citizens by categorizing their racial (rather than ethnic) difference as minorities through the impingement of their civil rights.<sup>48</sup>

Zia recalls the challenges of representing Asian Americans as racial minorities, she writes, “An appearance that Liza Chan and I made on a popular African American talk radio program drew numerous calls from black listeners. Some were pleased that Asian Americans would reach out to their community to talk about justice. Others asked if Asians were just trying to ‘ride the coattails’ of African Americans, and still others accused Asian people of prejudice against blacks. [...] [M]any European Americans were hostile or resistant to ‘yet another minority group’ stepping forward to make claims.”<sup>49</sup> These perceptions of Asians in

the U.S. as foreigners, model minorities and economically like-white contributed to the ambivalent responses received by ACJ in their lobby for support in Chin's civil rights case. Or as Zia writes, "Underlying both concerns was a suggestion, a nagging doubt, that Asian Americans had no legitimate place in discussions of racism because we hadn't *really* suffered any."<sup>50</sup> Historically, Asian Americans elude legitimacy as racial minorities because conclusions that they "hadn't *really* suffered any" or as Ronald Ebens states in *Vincent Chin?*, "I didn't realize there was a plight." Asian Americans rarely play central characters in America's racial melodramas for many reasons, but let us consider three: 1. Historically, their racialization is confounded by perceptions of their proximity to whiteness—culturally and somatically—which has constructed them as impervious to "injury." 2. Related, their racial otherness or "blackness" is reproduced through assumptions around their foreignness, which constitutes them as always partially, if not wholly, alien to America. 3. Their "injury" has been mandated and instituted under the guise of the state through its laws and its apparatuses such as anti-immigration acts and internment. Asian American cultural politics and its cinema that formalized in the 80s were dependent upon expositions of injury in its im/material forms—wounded bodies and psyches. Making this injury perceptible is significant in contrasting Asian American racial differences especially against whiteness to constitute them as racial minorities and as Americans.

This critique of injury is central to Jun Okada's scrutiny of Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* for institutionalizing a generic version of Asian American cinema that is "obligated to claim an injury and to name the injurer," but I read the film as illustrating how violence organizes citizenship and rights around racial, gender, and sexual formations.

In the film, we observe how government institutions, politicians, news media, and popular culture produced knowledges that attributed the failures of the American economy and

white masculinity to a threatening and invasive Japanese economy, which perpetuated the murder. While we know who killed Chin, the title and film actively questions who is responsible for the murder: Was it Ronald Ebens, the holder of the baseball bat? His stepson, Michael Nitz, who was holding Chin? Was it the judicial system that failed to indict Ebens and Nitz? Was it the media and the government that actively conflated the failure of the American auto industry for the efficient and cheaper Japanese imports that were being consumed by Americans? By 1982, the year Chin was murdered, unemployment rose to an astounding 11 percent in Detroit as the auto industry suffered from massive downsizing of their workers, and in particular, the Japanese economic boom and its automobiles became the scapegoat to America's flailing economy.

The documentary animates these tensions as coalescing around formations of gender, race, and sexuality from its opening scene: a neon sign outside the Fancy Pants Club, a strip bar, where Chin was to celebrate his last day as a bachelor, which is cued to the voice of dancer from the Club recounting the events. The film reconstructs the events with witnesses from the women at the Fancy Pants to the cops who were on the street, establishing the murder of Chin as stemming from an argument between Chin and Ebens about one of the club's black dancers—Starlene. According to Starlene, their disagreement escalated when Ebens emasculates Chin stating, "Boy, you don't know a good thing when you see one." Racine Colwell, a white blonde dancer, the key witness in the case offered the vital statement for the civil rights trial. Speaking to the camera, Colwell supplements Starlene's details, noting that Chin challenges Ebens stating, "I'm not a boy," with Ebens' reply, "It's because of motherfuckers like you that we're out of work."<sup>51</sup> Ebens' refusal to acknowledge Chin's masculinity and manhood ("boy") transpires from his own masculine anxieties as an autoworker ("It's because of motherfuckers like you, we're..."), and also nullifies his citizenship as Ebens identifies himself ("we're") against Chin ("motherfuckers like you").

Chin's body becomes conflated with the rise of Japanese imports and the loss of his manhood by white autoworkers. According to Starlene, Chin redeems his masculinity by knocking both Ebens and Nitz to the ground, fueling their emasculated rage. After both parties are ejected from the club, a witness explains that Ebens and Nitz actively pursued Chin to the scene of the murder, and as Nitz held him, Ebens repeatedly swung a baseball bat "as if he were hitting a home run."

According to Zia, the revelation of Colwell's testimony was crucial in their civil rights investigation, proving Asians in the U.S. were subjects of racial difference. Choy and Tajima portray how the news media dramatized the scenes at the Fancy Pants and its ensuing interracial violences, poring over the details around race and sex. Scenes of Lily Chin and Helen Zia on the popular talk show *The Phil Donohue Show*, and shots of print and news media coverage, illustrate the obsession over the case much to the ire of Ebens and his defense team.<sup>52</sup> *Vincent Chin?* portrays how Williams' concept of melodrama is an important trope that offers Asian Americans' moral and racial legibility to generate legitimacy and the visibility in their claims to say "much more powerfully: 'I have been victimized; I have suffered therefore give me rights,'"<sup>53</sup> and is significant in transforming Asian Americans from foreign ethnics to racial Americans, but the legibility of racial injury is reflected and acquired through Chin's violated *male* body.

While Vincent Chin is remembered as a tragic victim of anti-Asian violence in Asian American history and activism highlighted by Ebens' well-cited statement: "It's because of you motherfuckers that we're out of work," expressing his racialization of Chin as Japanese; in the documentary and Zia both note how Ebens paid a man to help them "get the Chinese."<sup>54</sup> These ethnic confluences portray how Chin is more symbolic of an abstract foreign threat infringing on white American masculinity as the purveyor of feminine attention (as noted at the Fancy Pants) and as the rightful owner to the American dream. *Vincent Chin?* portrays the

dangers of Asian American men acting as masculine subjects and perpetrators of violence. It is because Chin's masculinity could not be subdued by the authoritative whiteness of Ebens and Nitz—as indicated by his refusal to enjoy Starlene in the same way as Ebens as well as his verbal and physical reactions to Ebens' commentary that fueled their violent interplay. I do not want to detract from the tragic circumstances of Chin's murder or suggest that it is Chin's fault that he was murdered. Far from it. Instead, I see the violence erupting around mis/recognitions of heteronormative masculinity on both ends, and the subsequent activism around the case produced through civil rights discourses required both highlighting and neutralizing the gendered and sexual dimensions of citizenship to shape Asians in the U.S. as American.

Reading interracial violence through a racial, gender and sexual framework illuminates how civil rights discourses often reconstitute gender and sexual “neutrality” of race. Or to put it another way, claims for civil rights are inextricably linked around formations of race, gender and sexuality and adherence to those imagined norms.<sup>55</sup> Interracial violences and “hate crimes”<sup>56</sup> are significant especially following the legislative mandates of civil rights as the violated body exposes the contradictions of social and cultural sentiments of the imagined community against the maintenance of its laws and liberal ideals. In particular, representations of violated men, who transgress normative ideals of American manhood (white, straight, masculine), are the pre-eminent figures in shaping discourses around “civil rights” in the U.S. This is evident in the recent changes of the 1969 Federal Civil Rights Law, which notably recognized federal protections for crimes based on gender, sexuality, and disability under the “Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act,” but is commonly referred to as the “Matthew Shepard Act.” Despite the expansion of categories that would be recognized under the new law, its name considers how it is black men who are reflective of



race and white men who are reflective of gay identity and are exemplary of liberal progress and recognitions as American.<sup>57</sup>

In sight of these recent legal changes, we can question the place of women of color or queers of color under the guise of the law. In “Violence in Our Communities: ‘Where Are the Asian Women?’,” Zia writes, “[T]here is the very manner in which race and gender are constructed in mainstream society. ‘Women’ are generically considered to be white, while ‘Asians’ are generically considered to be male. If an incident of violence against an Asian woman is recognized at all, and sexual assault is involved, the crime will typically be viewed as a gender crime with no consideration of race. For Asian women, as for other women of color, the intersection of race and gender is a place of invisibility.”<sup>58</sup> Zia notes how women of color or queers of color challenges the very nature of civil rights and hate crime legislation, which cannot acknowledge the intersectionality of subject formations. In reading the murder of Vincent Chin as transpiring through negotiations of masculinity, I argue that it is precisely through masculinity in relationship to race that leads to the possibility for Asian Americans to reincorporate into the national body—literally and symbolically—as Asian Americans and Americans. Men have and are representative of the nation. The masculine male body that is violated for his difference has the legibility and moral authority to reconcile racial, gendered, and sexual excesses under the guise of the liberal nation-state.

The efforts to gain recognition as Asian American and as Americans in the Vincent Chin case portray the limited ways that Asians can figure in the American racial paradigm. This is exemplified in the trial verdicts of Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz. In the first trial, the Detroit jury recognized how anti-Japanese sentiment perpetuated in the national imagination can transpire to detrimental ends, and Ebens was charged as guilty of one count of civil rights violations. The case was forced into retrial on appeal,<sup>59</sup> and on May 1, 1987, the second trial took place in Cincinnati, where the local jury did not register the violence against Chin as a civil

rights violation, and declared Ebens not guilty. The Vincent Chin case reveals how mainstream inclusion—national and cultural—for Asian Americans always results in the irresolvable contradictions and the enduring limitations of its membership.

The activism mobilized by the unjust sentencing of Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz for the murder of Vincent Chin relied on Americanist rhetorics of civil rights, which are contingent on racial, gender, and sexual differences and highlighted Chin's heteromascularity. But the differing outcomes of the civil rights trials consider how Asian American heteromascularity is challenged by an irresolvable alienness, illustrating recognitions and legitimacy as U.S. citizens and Americans through the state, its laws and by members of the nation are partial and contradictory. Its bittersweet outcome is expressed as a site of hope by Zia, who writes, "After a century of seeking acceptance by distancing from one another, Asian Americans were coming together to assert their right to be American."<sup>60</sup> While the trials reveal the limitations of the state, and its laws in adjudicating civil rights and its recognitions as racial minorities and American for Asians in the U.S., for Zia, Asian Americans might not be *recognized* as Americans by law, but they could continue to *act* as Americans by asserting their *right to be* American.

### **III. *Better Luck Tomorrow* and Normal Asian America**

The Vincent Chin case and the documentary illustrates how, for Asians in the U.S., the right to be American is predicated around scenes of racial melodrama and its interracial masculine violence, which offers legibility as racial minorities and normative masculinity for the possibility of incorporation into the national body. Violence is a significant trope in producing racial, gender, and national legibility for Asians in the U.S. as Robert S. Chang notes, "violence operates to regulate boundaries."<sup>61</sup> Compared to its standard narratives, the significance of the documentary is that it represents the discursive terms of the boundaries erected in the case and its activism functioned to distinguish the ambivalences around Asian American racial

formations: it constructed them as different from whiteness (and blackness), gendered the male bodies as men, and formalized their male sexuality as heterosexual. The conflicting outcomes of the trials emphasize the unstable conditions for Asians in the U.S. to be guaranteed heteronormative masculinity, and its nationality. As I argue in the dissertation, these conferrals of national subjectivity as racial minorities and American citizens offered through remasculinization and its narratives of violence are always complicated by its relationship to the Asian immigrant figured as Chin's mother in the documentary.

Viet Thanh Nguyen argues scenes of interracial violence, where Asian American men are characterized as objects and perpetrators of violence operate as scenes of remasculinization that reincorporate the Asian American male as part of the national body. He writes, “[I]t is violence and its reenactment that serves as a key element of the shared experience between Asian Americans and other Americans; it is through violence that Asian Americans are first marked by others, as aliens, and then marked by themselves, as Americans.”<sup>62</sup> The violences of state policies and popular representations that subject and emasculate Asian American men as alien are regenerative of Asian American manhood and his violent identifications to the nation-state. Nguyen's insights are compelling as he notes Asian American remasculinization depends on performances of violence as well as being objects of violence; transforming someone like Vincent Chin as “representative of the larger ethnic and national community.”<sup>63</sup>

As violent objects and perpetrators, Asian American men regenerate heteronationalist formations of belonging and affiliation that qualified their exclusion. This is further evident in representations of Vincent Chin. While Chin was murdered for the perpetration of violence, Asian Americans often remember him as a victim of anti-Asian violence. In comparison to recent examples of Asian men in the U.S. acting as perpetrators of violence—Seung-hui Choi who is responsible for the mass murders at Virginia Tech and Chia Sou Vang, who shot eight white hunters in Wisconsin—these acts were often read as pathological, confusing, and

imperceptible acts of revenge, and were represented as acting according to the denigration of their racial and ethnic difference that made it difficult to access masculinity, rather than, as Amy Brandzel and Jigna Desai argue, retaliating against the limitations of normative citizenship.<sup>64</sup> In their reading of Seung-hui Choi, Brandzel and Desai convey how interracial and gender violence perpetrated by Asian American men serve as evidence of their racial distance from normative masculinity. The ironic terms of Asian American remasculinization poses a Sisyphean challenge for how Asian American men must act or be acted on to be seen in the popular imagination as American men.

These racial castrations are most profound in interracial, masculine settings, and designate the impossible terms for Asian American men to qualify as heteronational subjects and citizens in their comparisons to whiteness. These limitations are often pushed and challenged by cultural identifications and practices. (For example, Seung-hui Choi's identifications to Korean filmmaker Park Chan-wook's Revenge trilogy (most famous is *Oldboy* (2003) were cited by the press as inspiring his violence.) With this in mind, I turn to Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow*. I read the failures of the Vincent Chin case and Asian American cinema as emblemized by *Vincent Chin?* in providing Asian Americans entry into both nation and the mainstream are taken up in the diegetic and extradiegetic discourses around *Better Luck Tomorrow*. The film intervenes upon the ambivalent terms masculinity is accorded to Asian American males by departing from civil rights politics and its partial offers of national recognition through the state and its representational apparatuses (i.e. PBS). These paradigmatic cultural and political representations of Asians in the U.S. depend on the exposure of (masculine) interracial violence and (feminized) trauma as central to its petitions. *Better Luck Tomorrow* marks a cultural and political shift in Asian American representational politics from petitions to the state and recognitions as racial minorities and Americans to a

cultural politics of normal that is invested in the market and the recognitions as the consumer-citizen.

Comparing Zia's observations for Asian Americans to "assert their right to be American" to Roger Ebert's defense of non-white directors to have "the right to be whoever the hell they want to be," frames these changing rhetorics around Asian American cultural politics as demonstrated through the performance and representation of "rights" by Asians in the U.S. It illustrates how legal and cultural rights coalesce around violence, which discern racial, gender, and sexual differences to accord such recognitions. But compared to the Vincent Chin case and its appeals for recognitions as American, the representational politics of normal guarantees Asian American heteromascularity and national legibility through the suppression and elision of the Asian immigrant, and her alienating and maternal affiliations. Her erasure offers the possibility of representational equality allegorized not by interracial violence, but intraracial violence, which aestheticize racial differences to produce an Asian American market and its validations of the "mainstream." Normal, thereby, assumes their rights as American inherent, but pushes to examine what those rights produce.

In her analysis of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, Margaret Hillenbrand argues Asian Americans can only apprehend recognition as Americans by representing Asian American masculinity through the "cinematic language of Hollywood."<sup>65</sup> She notes Asian American cinema has become entrenched in repetitive tropes of ethnic explaining and becoming American, which produce solipsistic and pedantic narratives that are prohibitive of creativity, expression, and importantly, market viability. She writes, "Political consciousness, however variously couched, is what 'ethnic' cinema does, and the 'ethnic' tag, as everyone knows, does not do well at the box office," and quotes Lin, who states, "ethnic politics and ethnic cinema cause clutter for filmmakers."<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Asian American cinema's self-segregation to the limited public spheres of PBS and the art house, and rejection of the mainstream marks them complicit in

conceding their recognitions as American. But more importantly, their “shunning of the mainstream” corroborates with representations of Asian American masculinity that appear “much more about a plea and supplication than any real surety of self.”<sup>67</sup> She argues for the alignments of Asian American cinema and its representations of masculinity with Hollywood, “This is because...Hollywood is the United States: grossly cartoonish, of course, but profoundly constitutive of American identities nonetheless. And a masculinity that has no real presence in the mainstream is one that, at some level, is still awaiting entry into Americanness. In this sense, to duck the challenge of mainstream means at base to be complicit with its dismissal of Asian American masculinity, however defined.”<sup>68</sup>

The gendered connotations of her observations reveals the feminizing effects in “pleas,” “explaining” or “becoming” in the self-representational mode of ethnic Asian American, which results in their sociocultural exclusion from recognitions as normatively male and, thus, American. Hillenbrand cites Lin’s departure from Asian American independent film to stylized Hollywood movies as transforming Asian American ethnicity to a racialized heteronormative masculinity, emancipating Asian American men from the ghettos of Asian American cinema for consumption in the Cineplex. Yet, she contends its promise to offer Asian Americans’ passage into the mainstream falls short of its intents to “shrug off the ethnic label and wear the neutral, branded garb of their peers” with its heavy-handed and inarticulate use of parody, which speaks more as racial protest than subversive satire. Lin’s inability to fully divest of his racial politics results in a “strong residue of resentment,”<sup>69</sup> and prohibits the film’s full assimilation Hollywood by succumbing to the ethnic-explaining pleas for Asian American masculinity and American identity.

I redirect Hillenbrand’s analysis towards another reading of the film that takes into account its racial excess and “resentments.” At the diegetic level, I read the film as negotiating the historic conditions of Asian American racialization and its narrative trope of “ethnic

explaining” through the elision of the Asian immigrant whose particularities inform Asian Americans as dissonant to America and its abstract citizenship. The Asian immigrant and her feminizing, queering, and alienating effects are rendered abject in *Better Luck Tomorrow* to counter modes of ethnic explaining to construct Asian American men as coherent to the nation. If the Asian immigrant negates the universality of the nation-state and its apparatuses of identity and belonging, she also challenges Asian American recognitions for “heteromascularity,”<sup>70</sup> American nationality, and U.S. citizenship. The American citizen is not defined over and against the Asian immigrant by the virtue of race, but through the attendant processes of gender and sexuality that feminize masculinity and queer sexuality. Asian American representational politics of American depends on adamant displays of normative heteromascularity in all its diverse figurations: railroad worker, 442<sup>nd</sup> soldier, Vincent Chin, Wen Ho Lee, and even the model minority. An Asian American cultural politics of normal relies on these heteromasculine ideals, but level the irresolvable terms of the contradictory relationship of the Asian immigrant to the (Asian) American citizen by extricating the immigrant. Reflecting back on Hillenbrand’s assessments that for Asian Americans to become American, Asian American film must represent Asian American men and its masculinities through Hollywood and its narratology and aesthetics. I concur with her, adding that those processes are mutually constitutive, but moreover, representing Asian/American masculinities through Hollywood is insufficient in shaping Asian American men as American especially with the rise of Asian male actors appearing in Hollywood blockbuster action films such as Jay Chou in *Green Hornet* (2011).<sup>71</sup> Usually, Asian Americans’ recognitions as American require engagements with the Asian immigrant through tropes of ethnic explaining, but normal refuses the necessity of such validations by expelling the Asian immigrant and its signifiers. A politics of normal is another way to access American without staging the formation of self as one of

ethnic and racial transformation, facilitated through tropes of violence and the injured body. We can see American and normal as imbricating political and cultural formations.

Political theory from queer studies is central to examining how normal emerged as a radical intervention to Asian American identity politics and its narrative tropes of ethnic explaining. This politics of visibility formalized towards new ends through the cultural politics of neoliberalism that culminated in the 1990s. Under the precepts of neoliberalism, politics articulated out of identity formations critiquing global capitalisms and its relationships to cultural practices, environmentalism, feminism, etc, are discriminated as too political, complicated, impractical, and immaterial. In turn, confidence is poured into a politics of visibility that draws from liberal multiculturalism's diversity and neoliberalism's inclusive marketplace to balkanize complex and hybrid identities into its discrete and legible forms—often positioned as racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and especially following 9/11, religious—to provide the illusion of diversity and equality by appealing and reflecting all its consumer constituencies. Subjects of difference are offered legitimacy as national subjects not only from the state, but spaces it deems equally or more appropriate such as the privatized marketplace and its public spheres.

Under neoliberalism's politics of visibility, the marketability of identity is rewarded and garners capital when the political and cultural expectations of that identity are upended—normal evolves out of this incentive. In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner argues how the stigmas assumed around nonnormative sexual practices cultivated a vocal gay and lesbian “antipolitical politics” of bourgeois propriety and what Duggan refers to as “homonormativity,” which sanitizes and depoliticizes sexuality from gay and lesbian identities to motivate “we’re-just-like-you” agendas such as gay marriage. Warner writes, “The rhetoric of normalization also tells us that the taken-for-granted norms of common sense are the only criteria of value. [...] The embrace of normal is also prime example of antipolitical politics. The



point of being normal is to blend, to have no visible difference and no conflict.”<sup>72</sup> The asexual and thus, antipolitical formation of gay identity depends on “a kind of expulsion, abjection, and contempt for those more visibly defined by sex.”<sup>73</sup> It demarcates gay identity against queer sexuality. Extending upon Warner’s observations, the politics of normal is predicated on the contradictions of liberalism, which suppresses difference to only require difference to aestheticize and measure its progress through consumer spending and cultural visibility. The embrace of normal contains the possibility of asking what’s normal or why normal, but instead proudly states, “I want to be normal” and its paradoxical phrasing, “I am normal, too.”<sup>74</sup>

Relating a gay politics of normal to Asian American representational politics offers an intersectional analysis of its discourses. Politics of normal are reanimated in Asian American cultural politics to apprehend heteronormative masculinity for Asian American men for the purposes of mainstream visibility, and its offers of legitimacy as consumers and individuals. Normal is achieved by its attendant suppression and abjection of the Asian immigrant, which historically defines Asian American masculinity as feminized and nonnormative. The theorizations of queer scholars of color are crucial in examining how racial formations, and in particular non-white racial formations, are always “more visibly defined by sex.” David Eng writes, “[T]he conceptualization of racial and sexual difference as if they were distinct categories of analysis is a false construction that serves the political power, economic interests, and cultural hegemony of a mainstream social order. We cannot isolate racial formation from gender and sexuality without reproducing the normative logic of domination that works to configure these two categories opposed, independent discourses in the first instance.”<sup>75</sup> In relating Warner to the insights of queer of color critique, we observe how normal is achieved by reproducing Asian American men as heterosexual against the aberrations of the Asian immigrant.

The conventions of Hollywood are requisite for Asian American cinema for Asian American recognitions as American, but building upon Hillenbrand, I see the mainstream as illustrative of its aspirations to attain the contingent representation of normal. The film is significant for its representations of Asian American men, for providing the affective experience of watching Asian American cinema in the Cineplex, among other things, but the film's contended "break" from Asian American cinema is a pervasive extension of a politics of visibility dependent on recognition and legitimacy that formalized around the institutionalization of "Asian American cinema" that the film claims to buck.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, Lin's stylized piece of filmmaking are not aesthetics and narrative forms of contemporary Hollywood, but are adapted and appropriated from foreign, avant-garde and experimental cinema from the 1960s and 70s, which were influential to Asian American cinematic practices. Lin states in an interview, "It's funny that MTV picked it up because my whole notion was to make an anti-MTV film. In the sense that a lot of times music videos are very flashy and stylish and look great and rip off everything from great experimental films.... And I wanted to capture that sensibility—yet have meaning behind it."<sup>77</sup> *Better Luck Tomorrow* is illustrative of the mutually constitutive regulations of racial visibility produced by America and its state-authorized multicultural narratives of ethnic explaining to neoliberalism's privatized marketplace and its representations of normal. These negotiations and managements of racial, gender, and sexual differences surface in Asian American cultural politics as anxieties of the Asian immigrant, and her negotiations of identity.

### Asian American Suburbia

Suburbia has its own starring role in *Better Luck Tomorrow*. Depicted as a migraine-inducing bright and sterile sprawl of stucco houses with minivans sitting idly in driveways. Cinderblock walls and iron gates protect the privacy of its residents and partition the swank of houses into communities. An oil drill squeaks away in a backyard, self-generating capital. It is

because of this insular world that the protagonist and narrator Ben Manibag, an accomplished student driven by Ivy League ambitions, is endemic to a malaise that expands his overachieving energies to living by hook or by crook for unofficial extracurricular pleasure. As he explains in voiceover, “I guess it just felt good to do things I couldn’t put on my college application. Besides, it was suburbia, we had nothing better to do. Our straight A’s were our alibis, our passports to freedom.” Initially, we see his pals, the vociferously frenetic Virgil and Virgil’s cousin, the cool, James Dean-esque Han channel their restless ennui by scheming ways to collect easy cash in their pockets and causing harmless trouble. But their boyish hi-jinks transform into organized criminal activities when Ben meets Daric, the editor of the school newspaper, whose ruthless determination for Harvard inspires an article that contends Ben’s spot on the JV basketball team was a product of affirmative action tokenism. Daric brokers a treaty by hiring Ben in his cheat sheet business. Virgil and Han are folded in to the scheme, and with their part-time accomplice Juan, the foursome conspires to diversify their business from easily-executable scams and cheat sheets to grand theft, drug peddling, and arms trafficking.

American suburbs are read as social, economic, and cultural formations racialized as white following World War II, when American GIs returning from Europe and Asia fled urban centers seeking ascension to the middle-class.<sup>78</sup> Urban living was depictive of the stark racial and economic stratifications between working-class, middle-class, and upper-class worlds, the suburbs leveled those differences by creating middle-class, white enclaves that offered the illusion of material equality. Justin Lin’s suburbia draws its inspiration from American popular culture as noted through the cameo of *Leave it to Beaver*’s Jerry Mathers and the homage to John Hughes’ oeuvre of “teenpix.” Hughes’ *Pretty in Pink*, *Sixteen Candles*, and *Some Kind of Wonderful* illustrate the stratifications of class and normative gender and sexual ideals produced by suburban homogeneity. In American cinema, navigating the oppressive environment of suburbia is about discovering an individualism suppressed by its social order.<sup>79</sup>

In comparison, *Better Luck Tomorrow* depends on this cultural and racial motif to construct its teens as devoid of the historic and cultural implications of their ethnicity in this “rootless and soulless” place without a “geographical or spiritual center” to make them ontologically American.<sup>80</sup> Previously, I discussed how the institutionalization of Asian American cinema proliferate narratives dependent on tropes of “ethnic explaining” and “becoming American” construed as stories about intergenerational conflict and assimilation. This theme emerges in Asian American narrative cinema (compared to documentary) like *Flower Drum Song*, *The Joy Luck Club*, and *The Filicide*. In these instances, the parents are symbolic of the immigrant, alien, and foreigner—an “original culture”—that threatens their children’s assimilation and desire to participate in a new American life. *Better Luck* and its metanarrative project for an Asian American normal refutes these trajectories of “becoming America” formally through temporal manipulations, and narratively through the conspicuous absence of Asian American parents. In suburban cinema, dysfunction and degradation emanate out of disorder from the home, which is symbolic of the nation. Parents are an authority that is idealized or broken, portraying their possibility of transferring and maintaining the social order of the nation through bourgeois, heteronormative domesticity. In *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the home and the nation is only made possible by the erasure of the Asian parent who normally obstructs the Asian American child’s individualism and inclusion into the nation against the expectations of the home.

In its willful exclusion of Asian parents, *Better Luck Tomorrow* distinguishes itself by portraying what it means to always *be* (Asian) American without having to respond to the anxieties of origins. The interiors of the teens’ suburban homes and their rooms are almost all shot with the characters in center frame, and are absent of family photographs or portrayal of familial intimacy—the home simply remains in abstraction as background, which is antithetical to most films set in the suburbs where the stately and pristine domestic space is on display.

Even Ben, whose room we see the most, is remarkably impersonal and unfamiliar, and appears as architecturally isolated from the rest of his home. The exceptions to this visual rule are Stephanie Vandergosh, Ben's lab partner and the object of his affections, and her boyfriend Steve. When Ben visits Stephanie's home for a study session, her brother greets him at the door, Ben picks up a family photograph, and through him we explore the intimacies of her personal space and its objects and things, but this information is revealed to construct Stephanie as a transnational adoptee. Her family is white. As the main Asian American female character, Stephanie's figuration as an adoptee emblemizes her racial difference, but also renders her infertile from reproducing her maternal origins—later explained as China.

The narrative visualizes an ethnic assimilation that detracts what Neil Gotanda calls "Asiatic racialization." Gotanda explains, "Asiatic racialization is...characterized by a distinctive form of racial category linked to the idea that those categorized are permanently foreign and inassimilable."<sup>81</sup> Comparatively to African American racialization, which coalesces around lumping around racial color, as exemplified in the Chin case, Asiatic racialization links Asians in the U.S. to ethnic origins that racializes them as embodying innate cultural and political affiliations.<sup>82</sup> Orientations of a racial category to a country of "origin" such as "China" or "Japan" interpellate Asians in the U.S. as both foreign and feminized, unable to cleave the umbilical cord of their "mother land" to become an independent and assimilated subject. The *Better Luck's* representations of Asian America as normal abstracts Asiatic ethnic embodiments of its historic, political, and cultural particularities into a racial category that disassociates the maternal excesses of the immigrant (i.e. Stephanie as adoptee and absence of parents) that emasculate and alienate the Asian American, and represents the racial as aesthetic.

This is important for the film's gesture towards the apprehension of Asian American as normal in two ways. One, "Asian American" is a political construct that was invented as an anti-racist response to the interpellations of Asian Americans as not American. Since the 1960s,

Asian American activists challenged perceptions of their foreignness by claiming identities as “racial minorities” as Asian Americans *and* as Americans. While American racism relies on Asiatic racialization to mark Asian Americans as indistinguishable yet ethnically particular, Asian American political activism addresses the imperceptibility of Asian ethnic differences through a panethnic, anti-racist activist coalitions under the banner of “Asian American.” In *Better Luck Tomorrow*, there is no verification of ethnicity for the male characters. We see this especially through its configuration of the “model minority.” Representations of the Asian American home as cultivating American-like ideals of hard work and family values were pitted against the pathologies of black culture as evidence of the American dream. The figure of the model minority supports America’s inclusive imagination by portraying Asians in the U.S. as Americans, but also produces their Americanness as bred by essentialized cultural values from their ethnic origins. As indicated through the film’s press, it is difficult not to align the scholastic and professional ambitions of Ben, Virgil, and Daric with the figure of the model minority, at the same time in evoking its spirit, the characterizations upends the expectations of the Asian model minority. In *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the model minority transforms from its “positive” expectations as a preternaturally smart, passive, morally-centered, family-oriented citizen into an aggressively masculine, high-achieving amoral, individually-oriented American. The teens’ strives for success and their rebellion and bad behavior are not produced by parental pressure, but rather are driven by a hungry individualism for, as Ben states, “freedom.” These model minorities gone wild are no longer associated with essentialized moral Asian values, but are abstracted from those ethnic origins, which normally defines the immigrant.

On occasion, when they are subjected to Asiatic racialization or racial profiling, those acknowledgements of difference go unaddressed by the characters. In the same sense, “racial identity” or organizing around racial politics is a commodifiable source of cultural and social capital. For example, when Daric writes the article on the basketball team’s “affirmative action

policies,” it riles the support of a group of Asian American students that causes raucous at basketball game with their signs and chants of “We want Ben.” The activists are parodied as a militant and ridiculous group of students, raising fists to protest what they deem as Ben’s racial exclusion from the game. Ben sees their support as humiliating rather than empowering—a reminder of his abject status—reflecting his transcendence of the passé culture of a militant politics organized around racial grievance and desire for recognition. In comparison, Daric glibly mentions to Ben that he used the contentious politics of “affirmative action” to stir up controversy and win a journalism award to top his resume. These scenes portray the differing approaches, investments, and capitalizations of racial meaning that are iterated throughout the film. Hence, a politics oriented around race are prohibitive to the possibility of mainstream inclusion and ascendance as a subject of grievance (i.e. Ben), but when that grievance is objectified and constituted as a form of capital then its possibilities are rewarded (i.e. Daric). The film’s desire to portray “Asian American” as a politically neutral, racially aesthetic, commodifiable category is illustrative of its aspirations to reflect on the extradiegetic level, a politics of normal—to produce an Asian American consumer demographic.

Secondly, the narrativization and aestheticization of race characterizes *intra*racial differences throughout the film. The film inspired by Hughes’ classic *The Breakfast Club*, which portrays white teens in an affluent Chicago suburb conditioned to their assigned social roles as the “princess,” “jock,” “nerd,” “rebel,” and “weirdo.” These identity formations rub against their desires to be seen and be more than the expectations of their labels. *Better Luck Tomorrow* constructs intraracial differences through these American teenage prototypes, this is emulated in the film’s marketing materials—from postcards to the film’s official website, which labeled stylized images of the characters as “the boyfriend,” “the overachiever,” “the mastermind,” “the clown,” and “the muscle.” The only female character is obviously translated as “the beauty.” These intraracial differences are most pronounced through Steve, who functions to

narrate the economic differences between the wealthy elite and the suburban “middle class” (i.e. Ben, Virgil, Han, and Daric).

We are introduced to Steve, when he first meets Ben, riding in on an expensive motorcycle to pick up Stephanie at school. Steve’s autonomy and individualism is illustrated through his ownership of multiple luxury vehicles compared to Ben and his friends, whom we only see as a passenger in Han’s red vintage Mustang or on foot. Moreover, unlike the other primary figures, who are introduced in voiceover by Ben through a quick montage of snapshots, Steve remains largely elusive and enigmatic and is figured against Stephanie’s “beauty” as “boyfriend.” But we quickly gather that Steve attends an expensive prep school and rejects cliques and school events, his social circle is isolated to his women such as Stephanie, the high school feminine ideal of cheerleader and homecoming queen, and a white blonde from his prep school, who is referred to as “Barbie,” highlighting his attainment of another feminine ideal. Steve’s heteromascularity, and thus, individualism, is illustrated by his mobility and sexual prowess engendered by his economic standing, and against the homosocial and homoracial orientations of Ben’s circle of friends.

Two related scenes of violence illustrates how Asian American remasculinization in the film is directed to facilitate the possibility of an individualism that is not derived through recognitions as Americans, but as normal. Normal constructs Asian American male teens subjects to the purviews of the state and its legal apparatuses that have historically constructed Asians in the U.S. as alien to the national body. Or as film critic for *The L.A. Weekly*, John Powers observes, “Ben and his pals appear stranded in some eerie future. They inhabit a hypermodern suburban world so clean of the past that they could have come out of a test tube designed to spawn smart, bored, disaffected kids who feel entitled to the world’s plenty, yet disdain the privilege it brings.”<sup>83</sup> But this representation of normal requires validations not only through interracial, but more importantly, intraracial recognitions.



### Intraracial Violences: Asian American Representational Politics of Normal

One evening, Daric in the company of Ben, Han, and Virgil goes on a drinking bender, and crashes a classmate's house party. Ben voices his concerns about entering without invitation, but Han, in his usual masculine swagger, dismisses his anxieties stating, "You don't need an invitation. You just hear about it and you go." Yet, approaching the music, Han quickly states they should go around to the back, in favor of a more surreptitious entrance. Their covert passage is exposed by a white jock, whom with his multiracial clique, promptly welcomes their arrival by stating, "Hey guys, I think...Bible study's next door," then mocks Ben by announcing, "It's the Chinese Jordan!" Their interpellation of Ben as a "Chinese Jordan" and his friends as over-achieving Biblethumpers lumps them as an indistinguishable and ostracized group compared to the white jock and his friends' normative masculinity. While it is tempting to read the scene as interracial confrontation between whiteness and Asianness, The Jock's group of multiracial friends contravene such an easy reading. Instead, it is precisely his multiracial social circle that garners The Jock legibility as a proper masculine subject and an autonomous individual comparatively to the Ben and his friends, whose homoracial circle only seems to contribute their distancing from attaining that possibility. Daric retaliates by firmly bumping past The Jock, who unfazed by his body check states, "You know you got to play a real sport to wear that jacket," pointing to the tennis racket badge on Daric's letterman compared to his football. Daric responds to his condescension with a fist, and at first it appears that The Jock has the upper-hand until Daric pushes a gun in his face yelling, "Want your mom? You want the cops?" Daric's letterman jacket does not access him social respectability, and his body is insufficient to win a fight, but a gun offers authoritative legibility to his masculinity. It is only in the white jock's prostrated state that Virgil and Ben kick him and force him to submit to their newfound public heteromascularity.

The scene cuts to the four back in Han's red Mustang where the pensive and remorseful mood is punctuated by the sound of Virgil's adrenaline-induced chatter, relishing in the aftermath of his aggression. A car of four racially brown men pace them down the street, their threatening stares are intercut between close-ups of Daric, Han, and Ben, who take note of their company and can barely return their looks. Virgil remains obliviously engrossed in recounting the events at the party. Hillenbrand describes, "Suddenly, the rap playing on the radio is drowned out by a harder hip-hop as another car draws level: inside are the 'real thing,' four gangbangers of uncertain ethnicity who square up to Ben and his friends in a frightening standoff. [...] The realization that they are outclassed by real gang members with real attitude is driven home by the huge semiautomatic that one of their counterparts brandishes; Daric's revolver looks like a child's toy beside it."<sup>84</sup> In this regard, Hillenbrand reads the sequences around the party, the fight, and the run in with the "real gangsters" as allegorical of the film's partial success to enter the mainstream as their masculinity is only partially acquired because of their inability to enter it without enacting a racial critique as depicted by the fight, which she reads interracial and Daric's false masculinity compared to the gang members' "real attitude" and "huge semiautomatic." Rather than read Daric's handgun as a sign of a false masculinity, it is another accouterments of identity just like his letterman jacket, it supplements and accessorizes his masculinity.<sup>85</sup>

In revisiting the scenes prior to the party, I suggest that Daric's masculine redemption is a response to his public humiliation by The Jock, but more importantly, his botched date with Stephanie Vandergosh. Preceding the fight with The Jock, Daric brags to the other boys that he's scored a date with Stephanie. Ben and Virgil both know that Stephanie is dating the preppie Steve, but feigns ignorance in not sharing this information with Daric. Instead, Virgil places a wager with Daric about whether or not the outing is a real date. Spying from afar, Ben, Han, and Virgil witness Stephanie introduce Daric to Steve and her friend, who is obviously to

be Daric's date. The sequence of events—the party, the fight, and the gangster face-off—is instigated by Daric's shame of being publicly emasculated in front of Stephanie, her female friend, Steve, and his friends. In this regard, we can note that the fight with The Jock is exacerbates his emasculation rather than prompts it, and is restored not only by rendering The Jock submissive through his violence, but demonstrating it to his friends.

Once Ben and his friends discipline the white, football jock, they achieve the social respectability that they had previously sought through girls, letterman jackets, and academic decathlon. Ben notes this through voiceover, "We had the run of the place. Rumors about us came and went fast and furious. One had us linked with some Chinese mafia, and it was fine with us because it just put more fear in everyone." Again, we observe how racialized ethnic difference can be capitalized for their purpose. Yet, this newfound power and respect is only legible within confines of their school as evident through their run-in with the "real gang members," Despite rumors that whisper they're "gangsters," this reputation remains illegible to Steve, who treats Ben and his friends with a condescending smugness that effaces their manhood. When intraracial misrecognitions of masculinity occur, it appears as a traitorous act. For example, Frank Chin's source of ire is targeted towards white racism, but largely reserved for those Asian American writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston or David Henry Hwang who he deems as supporting white racism's sentiments of Asian American masculinity.

Thus, in *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the apprehension of heteronormative masculinity and individualism culminates in the final act's controversial and astonishing scene of *intraracial* violence. Reflecting on Nguyen's concept of Asian American remasculinization, I extended on his observation that "it is through violence that Asian Americans are first marked by others, as aliens, and then marked by themselves as Americans." It is the very alienness that continues to render Asian American masculinity as incoherent to the national body. Thus, the regeneration and renegotiation of an Asian American heteronormative patriarchal masculinity must execute

the potential threat of being mistaken as an immigrant—foreign and feminine—by staging its violence intraracially.

In the last act, the foursome dissolve their criminal organization, and Ben gets back on track to his Ivy League goals. But Steve approaches Ben and his friends with a final proposition: to break in and rob his own parent's house. For Steve, he justifies this wish stating, "It's time to break the cycle." Steve's hallmark line, "breaking the cycle" is an obvious metaphor that echoes in the film's aesthetics, narrative, and extradiegetic discourses. I read it as emblematic of the film's central conceit—Asian American normal. The circle is a common symbolic reference to femininity and womanhood, Steve's efforts to "break the cycle" by staging an invasion in his parents' home, and as we'll see later in the scene of intraracial violence, is necessary to apprehend individualism for Asian American men. While the boys are reluctant and uncertain, Steve asks them to hear his plan, inviting them to his parents' bucolic estate, which is evidence of Steve's overwhelming economic privilege. As the boys go through with Steve's plan, Daric seethes at Steve for perpetually misrecognizing him—his name ("David"), his homosocial leanings ("So this is where the Asians hang out!"), and his sexual prowess ("I can't believe Steph thought you were a stalker")—and subverts Steve's plan by hatching his own revenge to "teach him a lesson that he deserves." Daric tries to convince the other three by highlighting how they, especially Ben and Virgil, are always the subjects of his emasculating privilege and power:

Virg, don't you see the way that guy talks to you? That dude doesn't even think you're on the same level. Think about it? What about you, Han? That rich motherfucker wants to punish his own family? Why? Because Mommy and Daddy won't pay enough attention to him? And you. He thinks you're fuckin' dickless.

Hence, Daric's revenge is organized to force Steve to submit to their masculinity.

When it comes time to execute the plan Ben remains reluctant, and compromises with his friends to stand guard outside rather than participate in the "lesson." Steve's "lesson"

begins as soon as he enters Juan's dim garage lit like a noir interrogation room, and Han holds Steve as Daric throws a punch. The violence like the party scene is shot with handheld camera, and its movements express the uneasy emotions circulating in the room. When Daric tags Virgil into the fight, we observe an unsettling shift as Steve overpowers Virgil, the light swings, and framing becomes more erratic as they struggle for a gun that drops from Virgil's pants. A gunshot rings, and the scene cuts to black. The sequence is intercut with the aftermath of the gunshot, and we observe the four sitting in eerie silence in Han's car, and at a New Year's Eve Party. But when we return to the present, Ben hears the gunshot and runs in to see the four struggling for a gun and loosens it from Steve's hands by swinging an aluminum baseball bat. Steve expresses defiance to Ben's initial hit, but Ben responds by hitting Steve again and again, which we only see from the close-ups of Han, Daric, and Virgil as blood hits their shocked faces.

The boys initially assume Steve must be dead, but when his body jerks, Daric, in his usual ease and authority, takes charge to finish the game, and demands Virgil to help as he douses a rag in chemicals and stuffs it in Steve's mouth. The camera orbits around Daric and Virgil as they hold down Steve's dying body until his final breath, portraying the cycle not broken, but firmly in tact. While the final scene of violence is remarkably similar to the events that lead to the 1992 "honor roll murder" of Stuart Tay, which *Better Luck Tomorrow* draws its inspiration (see footnote #1), I argue for approaching film—both narrative and documentary—as a representational enterprise, and there is critical license to draw connections from multiple sources including the Vincent Chin murder. I consider the significance of the Chin murder in Asian American history and culture and its connections to the film formative in mobilizing the representational politics of normal as it notes the limitations, the cyclical rehearsals for recognitions and legitimacies as Asian American, American, individualism, among others. Asian American subjectivity is always contingent to the Asian immigrant, and to

break the cycle means to rupture the impossible circumstances of Asian American masculinity, nationality, and citizenship that the film aspires to imagine. The scene of intraracial violence evinces the promise of individualism and its acquisitional masculinities, but Ben's inability to kill Steve seems to curtail that possibility.

Intraracial differences and its violences are a prominent theme in representations of white masculinity. As widely noted, Joel Schumacher's controversial film, *Falling Down* (1993) portrays the anxieties around the disintegrating authority of white patriarchal masculinity against the polluting visibilities of racial, sexual, and gender differences. In *Falling Down* and subsequent films such as *Fight Club* (1999), intraracial violence is symbolic of restoring a sense of individualism, masculinity, power, and rights that are no longer unalienable through entitlements of nationality, especially for white men, who have been betrayed by "his people." His individualism and the once cohesive ideals of the nation are now disaggregated through discourses of civil rights, multiculturalism, and neoliberal capitalism. Thus, *intraracial* violence attempts to reconstitute a whole and complete manly and male subjectivity by positioning himself in difference and sameness. Richard Dyer argues that in *Falling Down* the restoration of whiteness and manhood is acquired by highlighting the ordinariness of the white male as played by Robert Duvall's detective character Prendergast against its more pathological figures: the angry D-FENS (Michael Douglas) and the bigoted Nazi (Frederic Forrest). He explains, "It takes a white man to kill a white man, to make the world safe, but...he must not be too white. He must be taken as ordinary, and it is seldom in the West that anyone other than a white male can take up that position. Prendergast secures the centrality—the invisibility, the ordinariness—of the white male."<sup>86</sup> Historically, representations of an Asian man killing another Asian man was representative of a degenerative violence emulated through the disorder and lawlessness of war, but in *Better Luck Tomorrow*, it also takes up "ordinariness," or normal, to apprehend Asian American heteromascularity. While Ben initiates the killing of

Steve, Steve's death is executed by Daric, whose sense of self is pathologically narcissistic. Ben in comparison to Daric or even Han and Virgil appears extraordinarily normal as narrativized through his voiceovers, which captures his vulnerable maturation into "manhood." Ben is the one who first decides to leave their organized crime business after deciding he has gone too far. Even when hitting Steve with the bat, it's done with unaffected mechanic execution, not in anger, but as perfunctory act.

Comparatively, the closing image in *Better Luck Tomorrow* is emblematic of neoliberalism's politics of normal that is dependent on a "progressive" politics of heteronormativity "anchored in domesticity and consumerism."<sup>87</sup> For Asian American men to become not just heteromasculine, but more importantly, heteropatriarchal, Asian American women are necessary (Stephanie drives Ben into the horizon), but only as adoptees who are infertile from breeding the immigrant origins, in affirming the place of Asian American men in the domestic—(suburban) home and (U.S.) nation. Thus, Ben and Stephanie's partnership portends a reproductive future of an Asian American family whose racial differences are not in excess to the national body, but is natural to its imagination. Their racial differences are like Stephanie's tattoo of her Chinese name—an aesthetic embellishment on the body.

In comparing the processes of Asian American remasculinization through the novel and film, the visual apparatus of film is entrenched in a different enterprise of capitalism, and its regulations of visibility and invisibility. In Asian American cultural studies, literature is the central site of the field's disciplinary debates regarding the representation and creative practices of Asian Americans. At the same time, visual media especially film and television comparatively to literature reigns as the popular site of Asian American public criticism and activism especially in the contemporary moment, where the politics of visibility dictates the politics of inclusion. Peter X. Feng keenly articulates why cinema, and perhaps visual media, is significant to Asian American activism:

Cinema's appeal can be traced to the apparent referentiality of the cinematic medium (the verisimilitude of the cinematic illusion and the attribution of objectivity that follows thereafter), a referentiality that tends toward a unified (not doubled) perception. [...] By contrast, literature is unable to deceive because a literary text cannot present itself as a referent, only as account.... Writing is so evidently a *representation* of reality, a translation of reality into language, that is clearly never truthful: writing cannot deceive me as to its authenticity—for that we need cinema.<sup>88</sup>

Cinema's deception—its illusion of transparency and authenticity—serves as its danger when it appears as stereotypes and conventional narrations of Asian Americans, but also its reward when it upends those expectations. Moreover, cinema's visual capacities for instigating the affects of reflection and affiliation, its place in Asian American cultural politics is powerful in imagining a self within a larger "community." This "community" has under the history of Asian American cinematic practices assumed to reflect Asian Americans especially as allegorized in its documentary form, and in *Better Luck Tomorrow's* aspirations for a universal audience dictates a new foray in defining what is "Asian American film" and whom "Asian American film" represents. Earlier, I noted that *Better Luck Tomorrow* portrays the arrival of Asian Americans into the mainstream, but the film is linked rather than a vanguard to the institutionalization of Asian American cinema and its mode of ethnic explaining. The entrée of Asian American film in public television was imagined not only for Asian American audiences, but was also an appeal to provide a visual hook of diversity through historical and political narratives that conferred Asians in the U.S. a place in America's body. *Better Luck Tomorrow's* expelling of the immigrant and its feminizing and alienating effects, hopes for an imagination of normal Asian American, whose universal appeal results in diverse consumerism. This is allegorized through the scene of intraracial violence—that is perceived as indiscriminate and colorblind (universal) in its execution, and racially aestheticized (consumer markets). In this respect, *Better Luck Tomorrow* is mindful of taking up the heteropatriarchal expectations of the nation-state, but also disregards and refuses to participate in its apparatuses of the state as



portrayed in the aftermath of Steve's murder. Looking for its validations extradiegetically through corporations and its diverse consumers.

#### IV. Looking for the Asian Immigrant

I want to conclude this chapter by briefly returning back to the Vincent Chin case and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima to consider strategies in viewing Asian American film and its “problem” of the Asian immigrant. The Asian immigrant is an essential figure in narratives of “becoming” and “explaining” that structure and dictate the racial vision of Asian America on PBS, and portend his inclusion into the national imagination. Yet, as noted through the Vincent Chin case, the Asian immigrant operates to negate the legibility of Asian Americans as Americans, *Better Luck Tomorrow* responds to the continual rehearsals of American, in its abjection of the Asian immigrant from the screen, and its attendant apparatuses of the nation and its state that subject it as feminine and alien. To put it plainly, the film is about Asian America's anxieties of the Asian immigrant. An anxiety that is compounded in the contemporary moment with the expansion of multinational corporations and its framings of culture, politics, and identity as multicultural, transnational and global during the transitional moment of the second millennium.<sup>89</sup> An anxiety about imported actors from Asia being in Hollywood films, and being mixed up with and taking away jobs from Asian *American* actors. For economically privileged Asians in the U.S., transnational and global imaginations of affiliation provides the possibility of a cosmopolitan and mobile identity, but at the same time, in the U.S., such identities are still impeded by the legal, cultural, and political attachments that associate the Asian with the immigrant, alien, and foreigner—often through the vestiges of its inverse imaginings—third world, migrant workers. These transnational formations threaten the citizenship and identity of Asian Americans as Americans and as individuals. In consideration of these anxieties, the extradiegetic politics of the film recognize

the limitations of the state and the nation, and determine the markets as the guaranteeing emancipation from identity politics and offering recognitions and legitimacy as consumers.

Examining these anxieties of the Asian immigrant in threatening the attainability of national identity for Asian Americans, I want to briefly examine at the figure of the Asian immigrant as an analytic in Asian American cinematic practices that enacts a critique of the nation, its laws, and cultures. I approach *Vincent Chin?* with Lily Chin, Vincent's mother, as the central figure of the film's narrative to approach Asian American cinematic practices as challenging the contentions positioned by critics who criticize the immigrant as an entrenched and paradigmatic trope of Asian American cinema. Instead, we observe that the Asian immigrant does not stand to reinvest in national identity, but dissemble its narratives. I will engage in a more thorough analysis of this potential in the following chapter through the Asian female adoptee. But first, I examine how racial ideologies become conflated onto Asian American cinematic practices that restrict its readings to content-oriented analysis or as explaining or becoming.

I concur with critics such as Jun Okada that "injury" in its attendant narrative formations of becoming and explaining is an eminent trope in many Asian American films, but we cannot be dismissive of injury and its violences, and instead, should be mindful to interrogate and engage its wounds. We must account for how the very appearance of non-white racial bodies in film and video privilege certain readings and assumptions around race and identity. For example, despite critical concerns that content is privileged over aesthetics in Asian American film, aesthetics are always central and intentional to all artistic practices. Moreover, implicit in such critiques as "[I]t remains true that a good deal of Asian American cinema is 'about' itself *by choice*."<sup>90</sup> Non-whiteness is racialized against the neutrality and normativity of whiteness, which refuses to see the unbearable whiteness of Hollywood cinema as an endlessly narcissistic endeavor of racial representation. Richard Dyer reminds us, "Whites

are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classes, sexualised and abled. At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race."<sup>91</sup> He later adds, "Black people can be reduced (in white culture) to their bodies and thus to race, but white people are something else that is realized in and yet is not reducible to the corporeal, or racial."<sup>92</sup> Following Dyer, we see the ways that Asian American artists, writers, and filmmakers must constantly negotiate and challenge the expectations of their racial, ethnic, and gender embodiments as "Asian American." Reading and viewing practices of Asian American bodies on screen are facilitated by the institutionalization of Asian American cinema and the politics that shape its dominant understandings but we can also employ and implement strategies that can look at these PBS films differently when centering the figure of the Asian immigrant as the site of critical negations to the universality of nation and its legal and cultural apparatuses. In examining the dominant discourses of the Vincent Chin case, I argued how the activism privileged "race" while depending on the norms of masculinity and heterosexuality in its advocacy of civil rights and equal justice. But Tajima and Choy's *Vincent Chin?* convey the discursive operations of power located in government policies, free market economics, racial segregation, industrial production, sexual policing and so forth converged at the murder scene. Likewise, the film illuminates through Ebens, Nitz, Chin, and even Vincent's father how economic, political, and social realignments reorganized American masculinities, racial politics, and cold war imaginations of the American dream. The film represents both Vincent and his father as an extraordinarily Chinese *American* story—his father was an American World War II vet, who brought his mother from China most likely under the War Brides Act (1945), which as a cold war policy would transform Chinese men from nonnormative bachelors to heteronormative

model minorities. The couple adopted Vincent from China, and a close childhood friend recalls his assimilation into American life as one of relative ease.

In comparison, Lily Chin appears in excess to these narratives of Americanness that are reflected through Vincent and his father. In fact, her life in America is recollected as a series of social exclusions that keeps her from enjoying a Detroit Tigers game as fans kick and curse at her and her husband or attempts to keep her sequestered in the basement as children call names and slitting their throats through her window. Her subjectivity as an Asian immigrant woman always positions her in excess to citizenship and American identity compared to her husband and son, Lisa Lowe writes, “For Asian immigrant women, the American contract of citizenship is quite evidently contradictory; if it proposes that the state as the unified body in which all equal subjects are granted membership, it is simultaneously asks that differences—of race, class, gender, and locality—be subordinated in order to qualify for membership in that democratic body.”<sup>93</sup> While Vincent can be used by the virtue of his race and gender as emblematic for civil rights, in the documentary, Lily Chin allegorizes the very contradictions and limitations of the place of Asians in the U.S. under the guise of the state, its laws, and its national body. She is the figure of anxiety in the politics of normal. This sentiment is clarified in the film’s final scene, which opens with an angled close-up on Mrs. Chin’s face, who in a faltering voice begins a careful appeal: “I ask you how could you feel as a mom....” The film cuts away to the Cincinnati courthouse where the jury in the second civil rights trial against Ronald Ebens has found him not guilty on both counts.

Before returning to Mrs. Chin’s emotional statement, we end with a final remark from Ebens, who states, “Being asked if justice failed in somewhere in this case. I don’t see anywhere it did fail. I think the system worked the way it should’ve worked, right down the line.” The camera lingers on Ebens, and captures his ambivalent and awkward expression. This final sentiment by Ebens jump cuts to Lily Chin’s close-up conveys how justice is transacted in

accordance to difference. Lily Chin's emotionally affective request, "Please...all...of you good and honest people... Please..." A male voice off camera interjects to help Mrs. Chin finish her statement, but she interrupts his talking points. "Please...I want everybody, tell the government not to drop this case. I want justice for Vincent. I want justice for my son." If citizenship, laws, and civil rights are sites that reprimand difference as noted by Lowe—racial, gender, and sexual—Mrs. Chin's request for "justice for her son" illuminates the challenges of her pleas to both subsume and bring to trial the racial, economic, gender, and sexual differences of her and her son. In conveying this reading, Lily Chin and the Asian immigrant reveals the resolute desires of "the right to be whoever the hell we want to be" or "to assert our right to be American" are from the same epistemology that concedes to the dangerous and unimaginative directions of nationalisms.

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<sup>1</sup> *Better Luck Tomorrow*, dir. Justin Lin (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> *Better Luck Tomorrow* is inspired by the "honor roll murder" of Stuart Tay that happened on New Year's Eve 1992. While director Justin Lin acknowledges that he drew inspiration from the murder, he claims that it's still a work of fiction that also drew from other references for the film. He states in an interview on *Talk of the Nation*, "[I] think all of us, especially in Southern California, are very familiar with [the murder of Stuart Tay]. [...] You know, I know only from what I've read...in papers and stuff, and I felt...to base something on that, it would be limiting because I don't know what exactly happened. [...] But I think what we really wanted to do was to kind of get everything open and really explore with the issues rather than base it on anything." He adds later, "[The murder] inspired me as much as all other kind of events—Columbine everything that's happened." In "Justin Lin Discusses Directing the Film, 'Better Luck Tomorrow,'" interview by Neal Conan, *Talk of the Nation*, NPR, November 14, 2002, LexisNexis Academic, Transcript.

<sup>3</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans" in *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects* ed. Gordon Chang (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), 39–78.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Harold's love interest is Latina. As I will point out in my reading of *Better Luck Tomorrow*, this portrays an expanding neoliberal, multicultural aesthetic, and colorblind imagination of desire.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Beale, "Pot Shickers," *Newsday*, April 16, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> *The Joy Luck Club* (1992) and *Flower Drum Song* (1964) were both produced and distributed by Hollywood companies compared to *Better Luck Tomorrow*, which is categorized as an independent film because of the film was made with a limited budget and without a distributor. There are other examples of successful Asian American independent feature films such as Wayne Wang's critically hailed film *Chan is Missing* (1982), which is often said to mark the genesis of American (and not just Asian American) indie cinema and premiered both at Asian American film festivals and at the prestigious New York Film Festival.

<sup>8</sup> See Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001). Margaret Hillenbrand offers a summary of this history in her article, "Of Myths and Men: *Better Luck Tomorrow* and the Mainstreaming of Asian America Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 47.4 (summer 2008): 50-75.

<sup>9</sup> "Independent Film 'Better Luck Tomorrow' Chronicles Asian Teens in California," interview by Beth Accomando, *All Things Considered*, NPR, January 23, 2003, LexisNexis Academic, Transcript.

- <sup>10</sup> Gillian Sand, “Boys, Boops & Bullets in Orange County,” *Indierag.com*, 15 March 2001, accessed February 24, 2004, <http://indierag.com/content/cool/010315betterluck.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Cohen’s slippage between Chinese and Asian American highlights how Asians in the U.S. are susceptible to what Neil Gotanda refers to as “Asiatic racialization.” This is also interesting since Lin makes no explicit reference to their ethnic background in the films.
- <sup>12</sup> “Justin Lin Discusses Directing the Film, ‘Better Luck Tomorrow,’” interview by Neal Conan.
- <sup>13</sup> Glenn Whipp, “Looking for a Piece of the Pie,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, April 17, 2003. LexisNexis Academic.
- <sup>14</sup> Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 4.
- <sup>15</sup> At the same time, with the growing demographic of Asian immigrants in the U.S., there is also a tandem project in Asian American marketing firms to appeal to ethnic-specific markets. Many of these marketing and advertising firms operate transnationally. While I was working at the Asian American film festival in New York, I interacted intimately with multiple Asian American advertising and marketing agencies many of them expressed frustration and difficulty in rendering visible a distinctly Asian American demographic comparatively to ethnic markets. This is also expressed in the balkanization of race-based Asian American film festivals to smaller ethnic-oriented festivals and Asian film festivals that I observe as occurring in New York beginning the early 2000s.
- <sup>16</sup> Carl Ngo remarks, “[The success of the film is] important, I believe, because it’s going to open the door to Asian-Americans in the film industry.” In Bernice Yeung, “Making Their Own Luck,” *The SF Weekly*, April 9, 2003, LexisNexis Academic.
- <sup>17</sup> The film broke MTV Film’s per screen average making more than Hollywood starlet, Reese Witherspoon vehicle, *Election*, which averaged about \$20,000 per *six* screens compared to *Better Luck Tomorrow*’s \$28,000 per *one* screen average. Since November 2009, *Better Luck Tomorrow* ranked seventeenth in *IndieWire*’s list of the top grossing films that premiered in Sundance Film Festival’s U.S. Narrative Competition, earning \$3,802,390. Interestingly, it is important to note following Hollywood’s appropriation and usurping of the American indie market during the late 90s and early 2000s, the quickly changing nature of media, among other things is reflected in the list as most of the top 20 films with the exception of two—both from 2008—were released between 2000 and 2005. See Peter Knegt, “B.O. of the 00’s: The Top Grossing Sundance Films,” *IndieWIRE*, November 9, 2009, accessed February 14, 2010, [http://www.indiewire.com/article/b.o.\\_of\\_the\\_00s\\_the\\_top\\_grossing\\_sundance\\_films/](http://www.indiewire.com/article/b.o._of_the_00s_the_top_grossing_sundance_films/).
- <sup>18</sup> Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*, 12.
- <sup>19</sup> Renee Tajima, “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking, 1970–1990,” in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell Leong, (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, 1991), 14.
- <sup>20</sup> Jun Okada, “‘Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell’: Asian American Film and Video, 1971–1982,” *Cinema Journal* 49.1 (2009): 20–40.
- <sup>21</sup> While Yoko Ono is not usually characterized as “Asian American,” I do so under the premise in which she is often racialized and gendered against structures of whiteness, which find her subjectivity and its attendant practices of art alienating and inscrutable. For a more thorough and fun reading of Ono, read the introduction to Leslie Bow’s *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism Sexual Politics, Asian American Women’s Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001).
- <sup>22</sup> The Asian American arts collective The Basement Workshop is one case where divisive differences lead to its collapse. See Bo-Seon Shim, “Race and Culture in Nonprofits: The Transformation of New York Asian American Arts Organizations, 1971–2004” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006).
- <sup>23</sup> Glen Omatsu, “The ‘Four Prisons’ and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from the 1960s to the 1990s,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood (New York: New York UP, 2007), 65; Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 39.
- <sup>24</sup> See James Lee, *Urban Triage: Race and Fictions of Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- <sup>25</sup> Glen Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 87.
- <sup>26</sup> Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*, 87.
- <sup>27</sup> Jun Okada’s history on the relationship of Asian American filmmaking and its incorporation into public television is incredibly useful in thinking through these ideas. What is interesting is that despite the commitment towards diversity that defined the formation of PBS through the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act,

Okada writes, “many minority film and television producers protested this inequality [of the lack of representations of non-white racial minorities] until the problem was addressed in CPB’s appointment in 1978 of an independent Task Force on Minorities in Public Broadcasting” (40). In “The PBS and NAATA Connection: Comparing the Public Spheres of Asian American Film and Video,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 55 (2005): 39–51. Also, Renee Tajima’s personal and thoughtful essay highlighting the cultural, political, and economic shifts in Asian American film is also significant. In “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970–1990,” 10–33.

<sup>28</sup> As I noted in my introduction, there were dissenting voices against the institutionalization over Asian American film. I cite Daryl Chin as one of the prophetic voices of this critique.

<sup>29</sup> *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, dir. Christine Choy and Renee Tajima (New York: Filmmakers Library, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Jun Okada, “The PBS and NAATA Connection,” 45.

<sup>31</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 27.

<sup>32</sup> Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 4.

Linda Williams examines the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the O.J. Simpson trial, and we can extend her analysis to include more examples such as Henry Louis Gates-Gate, the 2008 Democratic Presidential primaries with Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton portray how American culture represents racial narratives through black-white melodrama that portray the moral possibilities that expand the liberalist tenets of the nation. For example, in 2008, the possibility of having a (white) female President or a black (male) President promised a narrative of progress and redemption for a racist and sexist nation that has historically disenfranchised and excluded (white) women and African American (males) from electoral politics and the public sphere. Barbara Ehrenreich glibly remarks, “So yes, there’s a powerful emotional component to Obama-mania, and not just because he’s a far more inspiring speaker than his rival. We, perhaps white people especially, look to him for atonement and redemption. All of us, of whatever race, want a fresh start. That’s what ‘change’ means right now: Get us out of here!” In “Unstoppable Obama,” *The Nation*, February 14, 2008, accessed February 17, 2008, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080303/ehrenreich>.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Williams writes, “For the civil rights movement was nothing if not a black and white racial melodrama whose nonviolent tone of ‘moral supremacy’ represented a significant reworking of the Christian values of the original Tom story. Where Uncle Tom’s startling innovation had been to demand the recognition of black humanity in a culture and a society that gave little thought to black rights, now a white supremacist nation was belatedly being asked to recognize the rights of black *citizens*” (218, author’s emphasis). In *Playing the Race Card*.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 219.

<sup>36</sup> “Carnegie Commission on Educational Television”: 18, quoted in Jun Okada, “The PBS and NAATA Connection,” 40.

<sup>37</sup> Okada, “The PBS and NAATA Connection,” 40.

<sup>38</sup> Glen Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema*, 87.

<sup>39</sup> Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 60. Yen Le Espiritu uses a source, which quotes Kaufman as stating, “You don’t make the punishment fit the crime; you make the punishment fit the criminal” (141, qtd. in American Citizens for Justice, “The Case for Vincent Chin: A Tragedy in American Justice (the Official Position of American Citizens for Justice)”) in *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 141.

<sup>41</sup> William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993), 194.

<sup>42</sup> Eric Liu’s glib summary of the case (i.e. “lore,” “tale”) and erroneous details (“two laid-off autoworkers”—Nitz was the only one who was out of work) are indicative of his post-racial politics, but also its “lore” in Asian American studies and politics. In *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* (New York: Vintage Books), 69.

<sup>43</sup> Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen notes the ironies of these panethnic coalitions, which is illustrative of two interrelated political gestures: American racism, which makes Asian ethnic groups indistinguishable, and Asian American political organizing, which challenges the imperceptibility of Asian ethnic differences through a panethnic, anti-racist activist coalitions. In Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race & Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 67.

<sup>47</sup> In Zia's accounts of the conflicts between blacks and Korean American grocers, she notes the difficulties of Korean Americans to attract support of a panethnic Asian American community who were wary of alienating blacks. Moreover, it became difficult to portray blacks as perpetrators of racism against Korean Americans as blacks were conveyed as victims of racism, and the Korean shopowners as perpetrators of violence. See "To Market, to Market, New York Style," *Asian American Dreams*, 82–108.

<sup>48</sup> ACJ relied on the political language from Asian American activists of the 1960s and 70s, but their strategy departed from a politics of cultural nationalism and national liberation, which actively challenged state power and its civil rights platform symbolized through Malcolm X's famous phrase "by any means necessary." This ideological shift from radical liberation to civil equality is not only indicative of ACJ's political goals to be recognized as Americans, but reflected the demographic shifts of post-1965 "Asian America," and the contexts of global political, cultural, and economic changes that composed the organization's members and the conditions of their immigration. Helen Zia describes how these changes were reflected in Detroit, "Over the years, the Asian American population in the Detroit area changed considerably. The Immigration Act of 1965 had ushered in a new generation of Chinese immigrants, as well as those from Korea Philippines, and South Asia. Because of the new immigration regulations heavily favored education professionals, the newer Asian immigrants included highly trained scientists, engineers, doctors, and nurses. Many of the top researchers for the Big Three automakers were Ph.D.'s from throughout Asia. The professionals lived in the suburbs, far from Detroit's urban core and Chinatown. By the 1980s, Chinatown's shrinking base reflected the diminished role of the merchants. The children of the laundry and restaurant owners had gone to college and moved to the suburbs or other cities. The family businesses in Chinatown had faded" (62). In Zia, *Asian American Dreams*.

<sup>49</sup> Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 68.

<sup>50</sup> Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 68, author's emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 58.

<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Zia noted the dilemmas of needing the press to report on the case and the "plight of Asian Americans," yet in her memoir portrayed the challenges in the media's role in dramatizing the racial divide by baiting ACJ and its supporters into playing the race card especially against Judge Kaufman. Instead, the organization refused to make such claims in efforts to construct a larger institutional and historical case of Asian American experiences of racism, but such narratives were suppressed for the more salacious and compelling narratives of sex and violence. ACJ initially carefully constructed their arguments around Judge Kaufman's light sentencing of Chin's murderers avoiding any mention of race, while waiting for conclusive evidence to measure its claims.

<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> "It implied that Chin's killers mistook him for Japanese and blamed him for the layoffs in the automobile industry" (142). In Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity*.

<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Matthew Shepard portrays the ways sexuality emerges to reconstitute the gender and racial neutrality of sexuality.

<sup>56</sup> Often scripted between straight, white men and black men, interracial violence must be recognized as "hate crimes," in order to legally prosecute the perpetrators for civil rights violations at the federal level.

Jigna Desai and Amy L. Brandzel write, "Indeed, one of the central arguments against including "gender" within hate crime legislation is that it is, presumably, discrete and bounded within the domestic sphere, and, most importantly, that if we did include "gender" within hate crime legislation and truly recognize rampant violent misogyny it would overload the system" (71). In Amy L. Brandzel and Jigna Desai, "Race, Violence, and Terror: The Cultural Defensibility of Heteromale Citizenship in the Virginia Tech Massacre and the Don Imus Affair," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11.1 (February 2008).

<sup>57</sup> The original version of the law was introduced following the murder of James Byrd Jr. as the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1997, which attempted to amend the 1969 federal hate crimes law.

Moreover, coincidentally, during its congressional hearings, Representative John Conyers from Michigan, responded to inquiry on why the *state* (remember the case was heard at the federal level) refused to hear the civil rights case of Chin noting:

I want to thank you for raising the Vincent Chin case because in that case we are talking about the Wayne County prosecutor who has over 100 lawyers. We are talking about people of supposed goodwill, Mr. Lee. The problem was, it was *political*. It was *not* racial. The case was not declined there, but it was about the automobile industry. And they were thinking—this was a Japanese American and they were thinking about exports and



imports. And the case did not get picked up for what I suspect is political reasons. I thank you for raising that kind of incident which frequently occurs where the people are not racist at all. They just do not want to deal with a hot potato. (my emphasis)

Conyers' emphasizes that the courts' refusal for investigating the case was because of *political* motivations that were linked to the economic and social climate of Detroit at the time. The contradictory deaffiliation of the political with the racial is emphasized with Conyers' slippage of marking Chin as a Japanese American, and defense of the courts by stating it was not that *they* were "racist," but rather did not want "to deal with a hot potato." *Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1997: Hearings on H.R. 3081, Day 1, Before the Comm. On the Judiciary House of Representatives*, 105<sup>th</sup> Cong. (1998) (statement of John Conyers, U.S. Representative of Michigan), [http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/judiciary/hju57839.000/hju57839\\_0.htm#0](http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/judiciary/hju57839.000/hju57839_0.htm#0).

<sup>58</sup> Strangely, Zia doesn't connect how this construct also helps facilitate "civil rights" suits for Asian American men. Helen Zia, "Violence in Our Communities: 'Where Are the Asian Women?'" in *Making More Waves: New Writing By Asian American Women*, ed. Elaine H. Kim, Lilia V. Villanueva, and Asian Women United Of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 212.

<sup>59</sup> Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 81.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Chang, *Disoriented: Asian Americans, Law, and the Nation-State* (New York: New York UP, 1999), 41.

<sup>62</sup> Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 88.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Amy Brandzel and Jigna Desai explain in their analysis of Seung-hui Choi, "Through his series of videos, polemics, and photos, Cho highlighted the ways in which his isolation was directly related to normative white citizenship, the alienation of Asian Americans, and disenfranchised racialized 'queer' masculinities. Therefore, we suggest that perhaps the media, and white America in general, worked so hard to fit Cho within the wounded-masculinity type in order to avoid the other hermeneutical option: the racially oppressed retaliating for their isolation from the privileges of normative citizenship" (62). In "Race, Violence, and Terror."

<sup>65</sup> Hillenbrand, "Of Myths and Men," 54.

Tasha Oren also highlights the film's use of the conventions and language of Hollywood conveys a "three-dimensional" Asian American male perspective that "bridges" "Asian America" with the mainstream to forge the Asian American experience as consumable for mainstream audiences. While Hillenbrand perceives the film as failing in its attempts of entering the "mainstream," Oren reads the film's successful through its ambivalent representations and responses. Oren writes, "[J]ustin Lin's...reluctance to call his film Asian American is understandable. The trap for Asian American cultural production that aims for a mainstream audience is to successfully differentiate (narrative) *perspective* from (audience) *address*. [...] But the power and appeal of *Better Luck Tomorrow* and *Secret Asian Man* to mainstream audiences is neither in the transcendence of their particularities...nor the humanist 'universal' of 'race blind' narratives. Instead, their cultural work is in reconfiguring Asian American experience into the common vocabulary of mainstream entertainment fiction and its history" (356). While Oren suggests that Lin translates Asian American experience into the language of Hollywood neither to transcend the particularities nor humanize it into a universal sensibility, following my readings of Lin's interviews in the popular press, I would argue otherwise. Oren refers to Lin's work as a "bridging text," but I would suggest that its ability to "bridge" between Asian American cultural politics and American mainstream culture is dependent on normative gendered and sexual representations. In "Secret Asian Man: Angry Asians and the Politics of Cultural Visibility," in *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, ed. Shilpa Davé, Leilani Nishime, Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York UP, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Hillenbrand, "Of Myths and Men," 54. I understand Hillenbrand and Lin's critiques are directed at the "arthouse," PBS filmmaking styles, but their comments seem to erroneously note the cultural capital of "ethnic cinema." For example, we only have to turn to box office hits such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, Tyler Perry-produced projects, and any films and shows featuring Italian mobsters that consider the cultural and economic capital of the ethnic and race.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. I would disagree with Hillenbrand's assessment that Asian American cinematic tradition has shunned Hollywood or vice versa. Glen M. Mimura's book *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* situates Asian American cinematic practices in a genealogy of "Third Cinema" that is new and compelling, but is also aware of how "Third Cinema," Hollywood, and other cultural movements generated cross-pollination of ideas, styles, and forms, but also contends Asian American cultural producers' anti-Hollywood approach is an active and intentional act. Moreover, historically, we can observe a mutual fascination, desire, and intimate relationship between both "Asian American cinema" and Hollywood.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>70</sup> I borrow this term from Jachinson Chan, who writes, “In order to demystify this hidden link between masculinity and heterosexuality, I have decided to use the term heteromascularity to describe a compulsory heterosexual norm so that readers will not automatically assume that references to one’s masculinity means that he is also heterosexually identified. By disrupting the link between heterosexuality and a masculine norm, I hope to articulate a conceptual framework around an ambi-sexual masculine identity that is not easily compartmentalized in a dichotomous fashion (masculine versus feminine)” (15). In *Chinese American Masculinities*.

<sup>71</sup> Early examples include the casting of Jackie Chan (*Rush Hour* (1998)), Chow Yun Fat (*The Corrupter* (1999)), and Jet Li (*Romeo Must Die* (2000)) beginning in the late 1990s, and more recently the re-envisioning of *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* (2009) as a multinational orientation, terrorist fighting organization compared to a U.S. military operation, which included the casting of Korean superstar Lee Byung-hun as well as Rain in *Speedracer* (2008).

<sup>72</sup> As I noted in my chapter on Eric Liu’s memoir *The Accidental Asian*, we can relate this sentiment to the Lacanian mirror and how formations of identity are always dependent on misrecognition. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 60.

<sup>73</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 66–67.

<sup>74</sup> We can see these logics operate in Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” campaign spurred by public concerns around gay bullying. For more see Jasbir Puar’s incisive essay, “In the Wake of It Gets Better,” *guardian.co.uk*, November 16, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/nov/16/wake-it-gets-better-campaign>.

<sup>75</sup> David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 19

<sup>76</sup> Renee Tajima notes how this coincided with the professionalization and institutionalization of film production programs, which granted technical training for women and racial minorities to enter a field dominated by white men, and the rise of low-budget Asian American narrative features. Regardless, Asian American filmmakers were often still excluded from the Hollywood system and features were only seen in art houses. In “Moving the Image.”

<sup>77</sup> Erica Abeel, “Asian Americans In Three Dimensions: Justin Lin Talks About ‘Better Luck Tomorrow,’” *indieWire*, April 24, 2003, accessed February 17, 2008, [http://www.indiewire.com/article/asian\\_americans\\_in\\_three\\_dimensions\\_justin\\_lin\\_talks\\_about\\_better\\_luc\\_k\\_tomo/](http://www.indiewire.com/article/asian_americans_in_three_dimensions_justin_lin_talks_about_better_luc_k_tomo/).

<sup>78</sup> During the late 1800s and early 1900s, America’s industrial revolution enticed waves of immigrants mostly from Europe into the U.S. seeking job opportunity and relief from political and cultural oppression. The diversity of ethnic, economic, and religious formations that entered in the U.S. produced nationalist discourses to stringently define whiteness, manhood, and in turn, “American” against the indistinct and undesirable masses. European ethnics constructed themselves as “free labor” against representations of Chinese men as “unfree” and “coolie” laborers, barring of Chinese immigrant-laborers from entering the U.S. with the passage of the national 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the exclusion of Chinese and later most Asian immigration into the U.S. facilitated the consolidation of white European ethnics as whites through representations of what it means to be a laborer, American, male, and immigrant.

Historian Cindy I-Feng Cheng challenges prevailing assumptions that often portray postwar suburbanization as a narrative of white urban flight, and argues how sociological studies and magazine articles from this period (1946 to 1965) consider how many Chinese in America also aspired to move into these new cultural and economic enclaves. Cheng writes, “Suburbanization as Americanization thus alternately denoted a process of forging whiteness as the marker of legitimate citizenry and of assimilating and recognizing all racial and ethnic minorities as American” (1068). These contradictory impulses signaled how suburbanization and its exclusionary processes relied on the negotiations of racial meaning rather than fixing it. The suburbanization of Chinese in the U.S. relied on their racial aesthetics to motivate political discourses of liberal inclusion and communist exclusion. Thus, representations of Chinese suburbanization transformed them as heteronormative citizens, and in turn, the “domestic ideal” became “a gateway into *who counts* as an American rather than a *description* of the American” (1076, my emphasis). In Cindy I-Fen Cheng, “Out of Chinatown and into the Suburbs: Chinese Americans and the Politics of Cultural Citizenship in Early Cold War America,” *American Quarterly* 58.4 (December 2006).

For a legal and historical examinations of the suburbs, please refer to: Martha R. Mahoney, “Segregation, Whiteness, and Transformation,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 143.5 (May 1995): 1659-1684; George

Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998).

<sup>79</sup> Hughes' white suburban teens were often represented as outsiders to the Reagan-era of cultural normativity produced in the dint of increasingly disparate social and economic stratifications, and their discovery of an individualism is dependent on their recognizing the individualism of their peers. In contrast, contemporary suburban films like *The Ice Storm*, *American Beauty*, and *Revolutionary Road* highlight how characters suffer from negotiating the oppressive culture of bourgeois American society that demands its citizens to uphold its heteronormative social order. To dream or imagine otherwise, often results in dire mortal consequences.

<sup>80</sup> If *Flower Drum Song* and *The Joy Luck Club* serve as examples of what it means to *become* Asian American that are emblematic of its historical and political contexts, through the negotiations of intergenerational tensions between the "old" world and the "new" world that are situated in urban centers, *Better Luck Tomorrow* distinguishes itself by portraying what it means to always *be* (Asian) American with no reference to the "old."

<sup>81</sup> Neil T. Gotanda, "Citizenship Nullification: The Impossibility of Asian American Politics," *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, Prospects*, ed. Gordon H. Chang (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001), 80.

<sup>82</sup> Gotanda writes, "[W]hen Asiatic racial categories took root, the racialization did not coalesce around an 'Oriental' or 'yellow racial category. Those terms were widely used, yet they did not occupy a significant place in the race language of Supreme Court. Instead, the idea of Chinese or Japanese became themselves racialized categories" (84) In "Citizenship Nullification."

<sup>83</sup> John Powers, "The Dorky, the Docile, the Dead," *LA Weekly*, April 11, 2003, 35.

<sup>84</sup> Hillenbrand, "Of Myths and Men," 67.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 222.

<sup>87</sup> Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 50.

<sup>88</sup> Peter X Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 15.

<sup>89</sup> See Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

<sup>90</sup> Hillenbrand, "Of Myths and Men," 53.

<sup>91</sup> Dyer, who uses "black" as a discursive construct that names non-whiteness, reminds us how whiteness as a normative category appears un-colored comparatively to non-whiteness. In *White*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Dyer, *White*, 14.

<sup>93</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 162.

## Chapter Four

### “You must’ve been dreaming”: The Immigrant as Adoptee and the Other Possibilities of Assimilation in *First Person Plural*

Throughout this dissertation, I have focused on the figure of the Asian immigrant as a contradictory figure in Asian American cultural politics and its practices. In the previous chapter, I analyzed how *Better Luck Tomorrow* is not interested in claiming America for its Asian characters, but assume their Americanness by depicting the male high schoolers as normal. I argued how the fictive desire to be “normal” depends on the expulsion and erasure of the Asian immigrant and her feminizing effects from the domestic space of the home and the nation emblemized by the absence of parents, the atemporality of the narrative structure, and the Asian female adoptee.

From Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, John Okada’s *No-No Boy* to the cinematic and literary versions of Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, these works in their simplified readings, portray the immigrant family home as stifling to the protagonist’s assimilation into the nation. In these examples, the Asian immigrant woman/mother (i.e. Ichiro’s mother in *No-No Boy*, the narrator’s mother in *The Woman Warrior*, the many mothers in *Joy Luck Club*) is too entrenched in the particularities of her racialized and gendered past/origin, and unable to let go of the past in order to assimilate to the normative ideals of the new nation. She thereby forestalls her children’s Americanization. For the daughter protagonists such as Kingston’s narrator or Tan’s June, the burdens of translating or bearing a mother’s past are alleviated by its reconciliation with the promise of carrying it forward to new ends.

In *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the lamination of Asian American men with America depends on the configuration Stephanie’s of the film’s only female character as an Asian adoptee. Here,

the Asian female adoptee<sup>1</sup> is differentiated from the figure of the Asian immigrant woman/mother. She is cleaved from her biological and racial origins, which renders her both orphaned from her homeland and its culture. She is socially sanctioned, if not demanded, to affiliate with her new identity and family as American. *Better Luck Tomorrow* capitalizes on such sentiments to confer not only a heteronormative masculinity, but also a heteropatriarchal Asian American possibility as the romantic ending between Ben and Stephanie anticipates a reproductive union that is ontic to nation. Stephanie as the Asian female adoptee is sterile from reproducing the alienating and feminizing threat of the Asian immigrant and her cultural and historical burdens.

In observing the relationship between the Asian immigrant woman and the Asian female adoptee, I see both figures are dyadic. They reveal how antagonisms born out of nation-based formations of identity abide by similar rather than oppositional logics, which require affiliations to be heteronormative and singular.<sup>2</sup> The figure of the Asian female adoptee interrogates the family and home as the privileged space of reconciling the incommensurabilities of Asiatic racialization and national belonging. It goes against *Better Luck Tomorrow's* configuration of the Asian female adoptee as an alibi for Asian American masculinity's claim to national membership. Through a close reading of Deann Borshay Liem's moving documentary, *First Person Plural*<sup>3</sup>, I argue how the figure of the Asian female adoptee intervenes dominant discourses of the immigrant and its teleological assumptions of assimilation, and emerges as a disruptive figure to heteronormative formations of family, home, and nation. Lisa Lowe writes: "Rather than attesting to the absorption of cultural difference into the universality of the national political sphere as the 'model minority' stereotype would dictate, the Asian immigrant—at odds with the cultural, racial, and linguistic forms of the nation—emerges in a site that defers and displaces the temporality of assimilation."<sup>4</sup> Following her insights, I examine how the Asian female adoptee is not a figure precedent for assimilation

but rather a critique of assimilation's assumptions to cohere under the guise of the nation, and thus, the family. I believe such an exploration examines the anxieties to coalesce around representative categories such as American, Korean, Asian, and Asian American, and portrays America's investments in the "Asian immigrant" to uphold myths of inclusion and possibility that are central to the American liberalism. In turn, I hope to consider formations of belonging and identity that are heterogeneous and nonnormative to the disciplinary mandates of the nation and its structures of family.

### **I. Representations of the Asian Immigrant**

Dominant discourses in Asian American studies rely on what Palumbo-Liu calls "the immigrant narrative." He writes, "The immigrant narrative" homogenizes Asian American differences to "place all Asian migration, forced or not, under the same processes of assimilation and social subjectivity, despite tremendous historical differences."<sup>5</sup> The subjectivation of "Asian American" as both an economically independent subject (i.e. the model minority) and a political subject that challenges normative bourgeois culture and politics (i.e. the second-generation activist) is often at the detriment of marginalized Asian American groups such as Southeast Asian refugees and Asian, namely Korean and Chinese, adoptees. These discourses elide the heterogeneities of Asians in the U.S. that immigrate under particular historical, legal, and social conditions, and place them all under the same expectations for economic and cultural socialization. Scholars such as Palumbo-Liu and Aihwa Ong consider how the institutionalization of "Asian American" in the 1960s signaled an important moment in Asian American activist politics that promised Asians in the U.S. the possibility of calling America their home. In turn, it also produced "Asian American" as hegemonic ethnic, economic, and cultural formation that was used primarily against Southeast Asian refugees.<sup>6</sup> In other words, subordinated Asian communities in the U.S. did not only have to assimilate to America's ideals, but also America's expectations of Asian American. These crucial reminders

portray how hegemonic formations of identity are also composed through dominant discourses of Asian American identity politics.

Yet, Palumbo-Liu notes disciplinary mandates to find home within the nation, and cohere to its corollary formations of identity, result in attendant cultural practices that he calls “refugee memory.”<sup>7</sup> We can read refugee memory as a site of negation against the normalizing discourses of nation, home, and identity. By “negation,” I refer to Herbert Marcuse who writes, “The negation which dialectic applies to them is not only a critique of a conformist logic, which denies the reality of contradictions; it is also a critique of the given state of affairs on its own grounds—of the established life, which denies its own promises and potentialities.”<sup>8</sup> In following Palumbo-Liu’s observations, I see the significance of refugee memory like many other forms of Asian American cultural practices as one that is produced from and against the immigrant narrative and its regulatory formations of identity that elide “eminently hybrid cultures and subjectivities.”<sup>9</sup> In this regard, assimilation is a site of regulation, but also results in multiple, unintended identifications and practices.

In considering Asian American subject formations such as the refugee and the adoptee, I highlight the potential in challenging the Asian immigrant as a subjectivity that desires a nation, home and identity, and sees its possibility as a critique of the nation and its ideals. Central to this analytical framing is Lowe’s definition of the Asian immigrant as a formation that portrays how “immigration has been the *locus* of legal and political restriction of Asians as the ‘other’ in America, immigration has simultaneously been the site for the emergence of critical negations of the nation-state for which those legislations are the expression. If the law is the apparatus that binds and seals the universality of the political body of the nation, then the ‘immigrant,’ produced by the law as margin and threat to that symbolic whole, is precisely a generative site for the critique of that universality.”<sup>10</sup> The Asian immigrant is not a figure that resolves under the nation, but rather reveals its contradictions through his assimilation to its

norms. Scholarship in the field of Asian American studies from Erika Lee to Vicente Rafael have argued that the U.S. nation-state has relied on the racialization of Asians both in the U.S. and its imperial and colonial projects to form its national identity. Yet, contradictory discourses of the Asian immigrant as foreign and alien yet symbolic of the national ethos of liberal citizenship impede the ways that Asians in the U.S. have been able to make and claim “home” within its national borders, and result in arguments for further distinguishing the Asian from Asian American in order to facilitate its claims.<sup>11</sup>

I look at the figure of the Asian female adoptee as a compelling figure to challenge what it means to claim home and family as projects of national affiliation. For Asians in the U.S., national identity is often guaranteed through narratives of assimilation, but for Asian adoptees her immigration has been obscured along with her past. As such, the assimilation of transnational adoptees is perceived as a matter of assumption rather than one of becoming. Adoptees are often designated as orphan/refugees, but rarely as immigrants. Comparatively, to Asian Americans, who distance the perilous image of immigrant (foreigner) from their body as seen through the works of Eric Liu and Justin Lin, for adoptees, the designation as immigrants attend to a different set of implications. Patrick McDermott writes how the Salvadorian Civil War and its legacies are a significant factor in the immigration of Salvadorans into the U.S. and the adoption of Salvadoran children. These two movements out of the country are often seen as disconnected, especially since the migration of children as adoption erases the political economy to structure sentimental formations of family. He writes, “The Salvadorans who arrived in the United States through international adoption during the war are as much a part of the story of El Salvador as we are a part of the story of the United States. In the States, Salvadoran adoptees are only seen as adoptees and not recognized as the Salvadoran immigrants that we are. The same social factors that drove thousands of Salvadorans to leave



their homeland to emigrate to the United States caused many of us Salvadoran adoptees to become available for adoption.”<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, as noted in chapter 2, Ji-Yeon Yuh theorizes Korean migration as a post-1945 global framework that is “shaped by the division and militarization of the Korean peninsula. The Korean War in particular has had a dramatic and profound impact. Most, if not all, of Korean migration since 1950 can be traced to the war and its consequences.”<sup>13</sup> Yuh’s genealogy of Korean migration offers an exploration into the material linkages between collective movements such as adoption, war brides, and professional migrations that occurred within and away from Korea. The placement of the Asian female adoptee in the American family home depended on the erasure of the material conditions of their arrival, and her subsequent assimilation. In following such considerations, I find her a generative figure in upending dominant representations of the immigrant and her assimilation, challenging the assumed teleologies of identity in its various forms: American, Asian American, and oftentimes, in the adoptee’s case, Korean.

This chapter engages closely with David Eng’s article “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” which offers an important cultural analysis to the study of transnational Asian adoption. Illustrating the curious place of Asian adoptees in Asian American studies and its cultural politics, Eng asks: “Is the transnational adoptee an immigrant? Is she...an Asian American?”<sup>14</sup> He adds, “If the transnational adoptee is, in fact, an Asian American immigrant, what kind of labor is she performing for the family, and for the nation?”<sup>15</sup> Asian American as immigrant is defined by its potential for material exploitation, and Eng’s query considers how defining the transnational adoptee as an Asian American immigrant ultimately depends on her labor.

Likewise, in their analyses of literature by Korean adoptees, Catherine Ceniza Choy and Gregory Paul Choy write, “What distinguishes Korean adoptees from other Asian

Americans, however is not their labor in the U.S. economy, but rather their ‘consumption’ by white adoptive families in the United States.”<sup>16</sup> Eng extends this observation, and considers how consumption is also part of an economy of labor, he writes, “In the postwar period of the Asian American *citizen* the practice of transnational adoption expands wage labor into arenas of consumer capitalism meant to effect a different type of labor power. We might describe this form not as ‘productive labor,’ in the traditional Marxian sense, but as ‘consumptive labor.’”<sup>17</sup> He continues to explain how Asian adoptees are consumed by American culture to perform the ideological labor of triangulating black-white relations in the U.S., and fulfilling America’s promise of sentimental liberalism by giving white, middle-class parents who are unwilling to adopt black children the option of transnational adoption.

The labor of the transnational adoptee is defined by her consumption by American culture, which embeds her as part of the cultural and political economies that manage and exploit her racial difference to fulfill normative visions of family. If historically, the Asian immigrant and the Asian American are excluded and included *as* American through his labor, the Asian female adoptee figures in excess and proximity to definitions of *Asian American* and *immigrant* through her labor. In other words, the inclusion of Asian female adoptee into the white American family is predicated through her distance from definitions of immigrant and Asian American in spite of her movement from places like Korea and China into the U.S. and her racialization as non-white. For Asian immigrants and Asian Americans their inclusion into American society as laborers and citizens depends on their very construct as immigrants. Stuart Hall writes, “The trouble is that the instant one learns to be ‘an immigrant,’ one recognizes one can’t be an immigrant any longer; it isn’t a tenable place to be.”<sup>18</sup> Hall considers how the immigrant is an interstitial figure, a non-identity. The immigrant is to assume identity through the processes of assimilation upon arriving into the temporal space of America.<sup>19</sup> The Asian female adoptee is constituted as American through her incorporation into the family, which

cleaves her from the social and economic contexts of her arrival to construct her as orphan and adoptee rather than immigrant. In many ways, she is assumed to always-already be American by her placement in the family as an adoptee. I state this to intervene in how attempts to define the Asian female adoptee as Asian American and immigrant through labor reinforces dominant discourses of the immigrant and Asian American as dependent on definitions of assimilation that contribute to national ideals.

I argue the figure of the Asian female adoptee intervenes upon the immigrant as a subject formation that desires recognition as a U.S. citizen, and a home within the nation-state. Challenging popular representations of the Asian immigrant in its stereotypical configurations as F.O.B.-foreigner and in its more idealized form as laborer-activist, I consider how these figures reinforce prevailing assumptions that defines assimilation as a process that supposes identity and home, and reconsider assimilation as a site that is productive of alterity and resistance to dominant expectations.

Asian American activist politics, especially in second-generation Asian American culture through blogs like Angry Asian Man and magazines like *Hyphen*, have demanded recognition as U.S. citizen and American nationality against fictions of the immigrant as F.O.B., spy, and foreigner. At the same time, their U.S. citizenship and Americanness depends on the immigrant-laborer-activist as an ideal representation of “the community.” The desire for recognition as U.S. citizen against fictions of the immigrant as F.O.B., spy, and foreigner portray the contradictory politics that guide American and Asian American political formations noting how ideal representations of the “immigrant-laborer” challenge cultural and legal recognition as American. These competing representations are rooted in radical political paradigms, but also converge with liberalist fictions of inclusion and abstract citizenship.

Within the context of Asian American cultural studies and cultural practices, most critiques about the Asian foreigner-outsider are contingent on its stereotypes or what Robert

Lee describes as the “Oriental,”<sup>20</sup> at the same time, it is also important to note how Asian American claims to America requires distancing the foreign from the domestic, the immigrant from the American. In my analysis of Eric Liu’s *The Accidental Asian* and *Better Luck Tomorrow*, I argued how the expulsion of the Asian immigrant offers Asian American males discursive legibility as Asian *American* and American through their heteronormative masculinity.

Disavowing the foreign and feminizing elements of their racialization is attained by depicting themselves as assimilated subjects through their articulations of English, their heterosexuality, and enactors of violence. For example, during the trial of nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, who was falsely accused of being a spy for China during his tenure at the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory, activists highlighted Lee’s contribution to American security, his status as an American citizen, and importantly, his standing as an upper middle-class professional that lived a normative suburban life as evidence of his Americanness and consequently his innocence. Not to diminish the significance of citizenship and the rights that are attendant to its legal status, my point is how activists depended on arguing for Lee’s innocence not only through legal arguments, but also by defining him as embodying the normative ideals of American legal and cultural citizenship.<sup>21</sup>

Comparatively, for working-class and low-income Asian immigrants, who are undocumented and illegal aliens, labor becomes the prevailing argument for their inclusion into American society. Dominant discourses in Asian American history, depict the Asian immigrant-laborer’s material, cultural, and social contributions as central to the formation of the U.S. nation-state. This narrative is evidence to claim Asian Americans a place in America’s history and verify them as subjects of the U.S. nation-state and Americans.<sup>22</sup> These sentiments were prominent during the spring of 2006 when hundreds of thousands of protestors marched streets across the country in support of Senators John McCain and Edward Kennedy’s immigration reform bill (i.e. “Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act”), which in its

amendments would provide citizenship to illegal immigrants who had been long-time residents of the United States. During “The National Day of Action for Immigrant Justice Rally,” immigrant rights advocates and protestors supporting the legislation valorized the immigrant as laborer, foregrounding stories of immigrants as central to the function of everyday American life and most importantly, to the American dream. On April 10, 2006, Democrat Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts emphasized this when addressing the 200,000 people on the Washington Mall saying, “You are what this debate is about. It’s about good people who come to America to work, to raise their families, to contribute to their community, and to reach the American dream.”<sup>23</sup> Since whiteness is racially representative of the nation, for non-whites, the temporality of assimilation that Kennedy outlines transforms immigrants to Americans through their labor, whose material contributions ascertains the possibility of their integration and assimilation to American ideals of family and home, which in turn, mobilizes “progress as a nation and our future economic growth.”<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, Kennedy and others shaped these foreign and laboring immigrants as potential Americans, but the protests also revealed the failures to represent the immigrants as *only* wanting “American identities.” Sheryl Gay Stolberg writes, “The protestors have discovered that there is a thin and potentially dangerous line between promoting national pride and pushing opponents’ buttons. They used tactics—flying the Mexican flag, recording “The Star-Spangled Banner in Spanish—that have left even some supporters feeling a bit queasy.”<sup>25</sup> The transnational displays of affiliation that emerged during the protests portrayed the multiple, hybrid, and contradictory formations aroused out of desires for U.S. citizenship. While the immigrants from the protests are racialized as “Mexican,” I use this example to illustrate how the non-white immigrant is imagined, discussed, and represented as a subject that supports the American Dream as a feasible project. Kennedy’s representations of the immigrant-laborers as potential Americans was troubled by the appearance of non-American

flags, non-English signs, and non-English rallying chants. These transnational and hybrid imaginations of belonging that coalesced around the possibility of the transformation of rights and citizenship deemed other types of affiliation and desires as “queasy” portraying national identifications must remain monogamous and exclusive.

Historically, the Asian immigrant-laborer has been (and is sometimes still) legally excluded from the U.S., but the representation of his laboring body is central to the function of U.S. capitalism and the trajectory of its national progress (e.g. The railroad worker and Promontory Point, UT) and U.S. history serves as evidence of Asian Americans as national subjects. Historical narratives of Chinese Exclusion and Japanese internment are important reminders of the contradictory terms that define Asian America’s relationship to the nation, at the same time these contradictions are resolved when Asian racial, gender, and sexual differences are used to aestheticize and support American exceptionalism by highlighting how potentially American and/or American they were and are. Kandice Chuh writes, “Analyses of the myriad failures of America are commonplace and have advanced a kind of politics of recognition through which the presence and contributions of racialized groups to national life have been made visible.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, under the politics of recognition, the reconciliatory tenets of the 2006 immigration bill, albeit failed, elides Asian and other non-white immigrants as laborers defined by their racial and gendered excesses, and represents their totalized and allegiant identifications to the U.S. nation-state as expanding the promise and dream of America.

In Asian American studies and cultural politics, the Asian immigrant is both an idealized (i.e. assimilable laborer) and abject<sup>27</sup> (i.e. “queasy”) figure in mobilizing demands for recognition as an identity and a home affiliated with the U.S. nation-state. Disassociating the queasy signifiers of Asia from Asian America contains these contradictions to confer national identity and its offers of home for Asians in the U.S. by representing them as “proper” (in its

varying sentiments—Frank Chin to Eric Liu), often male, laboring subjects. As David Eng states, the Asian adoptee can be understood as both Asian American and an immigrant through her consumptive labors to make families and negotiate American racial relations. But through my examples, I consider the necessity in examining the limitations in defining the immigrant as produced by labor, which in turn, in its dominant discourses, offers identity by participating in the reproduction of the material conditions of capital and national identity through the heteronormative home. Or, put differently, the Asian immigrant is contingent upon her labor, but that labor does not only reproduce discourses of nationalism and capitalism. It is constitutively productive of seditious practices and feelings.

How does the Asian female adoptee prompt a reframing of these dominant discourses of the Asian immigrant and her assimilation as anticipatory of identity and inherently reproductive of nationalisms and capitalisms? Immigrants are defined by a yearning for an identity offered through their labors and its attendant assimilations,<sup>28</sup> which sanctions their identifications to America; on the other hand, adoptees are conferred with national identity as subjects of adoption rather than immigration. Instead of asking, “How is the Asian female adoptee an immigrant?,” how does inverting the terms to ask “How is an immigrant an Asian female adoptee?” reframe the question to dispute the “immigrant” as a subject in need of identity. To explain, the assumption is that the adoptee is already part of the “American dream” through the privileged conditions of her immigration into the U.S. and her place in the white, American upper middle class family. As I explained through my reading of the character, Stephanie Vandergosh, in *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the Asian female adoptee is perceived as hewed from Asia and its material implications, and is an example of Asians in the U.S. who can wholly claim America. The Asian female adoptee is an ideal immigrant subject as she is gendered and sexualized to reproduce the material conditions of capital and national identity without the “queasy.” Also, it is perceived that the American dream is guaranteed through her “privileged

immigration,” we can see how the Asian female adoptee is an Asian immigrant, but, as stated earlier, is differentiated from the Asian immigrant *woman* in comparing the historic and material conditions of her immigration and the product of her labors.<sup>29</sup>

I propose this query—the immigrant is an Asian female adoptee—to consider the irreconcilable and incommensurate racial, gender, and sexual tensions that structure her place in the white American family, and home within the nation-state. In this regard, we must be mindful of the material and historic differences between the Asian female adoptee from the Asian immigrant woman, but I find it useful to understand how both subject formations enable critiques of identity that is invested in legibility and representation as Asian, American, and/or Asian American. Lisa Lowe writes:

While the official narratives of immigrant inclusion propose to assimilate immigrants as citizen, the conditions of Asian immigrant women in the United States directly contradict these promises of incorporation, equal opportunity, and equal representation. [...] For Asian immigrant women, the American contract of citizenship is quite evidently contradictory; if it proposes that the state as the unified body in which all equal subjects are granted membership, it simultaneously asks that differences—of race, class, gender, and locality—be subordinated in order to qualify for membership in that democratic body.<sup>30</sup>

The Asian immigrant woman and her racial, gender, and sexual differences are aestheticized and exploited to forward the ideals of the nation-state, but also to structure her work as determined and legitimated by her particularities. The “racialized feminization of labor” challenges the dominant discourses around the immigrant by portraying the irreducibility of her labor as merely abstract. The relational figuration of Asian immigrant woman and Asian female adoptee complicates a politics driven by “singular narratives of consciousness,” and “articulates multiple, non-equivalent, but linked determinations without assuming their containment within the horizon of an absolute totality and its presumption of a singular subject” (165). Examining the immigrant as an Asian female adoptee challenges the teleology of assimilation as achieving a “singular subjectivity.”



Vijay Prashad writes, “The word *assimilate* is used as a universal value, so that few of us can reply that we don’t want to assimilate, we want to remain separate (‘Then why did you come here?’ is the response). If we reframe the problem not as assimilation but as conformity, we have a political leg to stand upon (‘my being here is already assimilation, but I refuse to conform to some of your mores’)” (author’s emphasis).<sup>31</sup> Asian American leftist political activism and dominant discourses in Asian American studies critique assimilation as a site of conformity at the expense of cultural loss, its oppressive demands, and political dilution. My contention is that we are never outside of heteronormativity’s demands. Likewise, we do not we are never totalized under its normalizing expectations. In my reading of Deann Borshay Liem’s documentary *First Person Plural*, I examine how the configuration of “immigrant as adoptee” disrupts logics that assume forgetting and conformity as inherent to models of assimilation, confounding the teleological thrust of the “immigrant narrative,” which constructs the immigrant as a subjectivity that requires the stability and legibility available in nation-based formations of belonging and identity. Borshay Liem’s film brings forth how assimilation is constituted by a continually disrupted temporal order that attempts to remember, and in the process of remembering, produces knowledges, absences, and fictive tensions that negates the disciplinary mandates of identity. In turn, the “immigrant narrative” and its attendant historicizing narrations that attempt to consolidate the Asian immigrant as Asian American, American and even Asian and the Asian female adoptee as American, daughter, and sister are transformed to imagine hybrid forms of histories, subjectivities, and identifications that participates in the making of homes and families that are multiple, fragmentary, and always possible.

II. “Assimilation is a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.” – Robert Park

“The nature of social contacts is decisive in the process. Assimilation naturally takes place most rapidly where contacts are primary, that is, where they are most intimate and intense, as in the area of touch relationship in the family circle and in intimate congenial groups.”<sup>32</sup> —Robert Park

“The past continues to speak to us. But this is no longer a simple, factual ‘past,’ since our relation to it is, like the child’s relation to the mother, always-already ‘after the break.’ It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.”  
—Stuart Hall

Deann Borshay Liem’s personal documentary *First Person Plural* (2000) follows the discomfiting process of reconciling familial and national histories against one’s personal memories, and in turn, portrays how family, home, and nation are fraught sites of belonging. Adopted in 1966 by the Borshays, an upper middle-class white family in Fremont, CA, Borshay Liem discovers twenty years later that her adoptive identity, Cha Jung Hee, was imposed upon her when the child meant for the Borshays was removed from the orphanage by her father after the adoption proceedings were finalized. Born as Kang Ok Jin, Borshay Liem had been placed temporarily at Sun Duk orphanage by her widowed mother, but under pressure from her church eventually relinquishes Ok Jin for adoption.

The film visualizes Borshay Liem as a subject of three complicated and competing biological, institutional, and familial histories. These identities that she embodies are portrayed as mutually constitutive machinations of American militarization, U.S. cold war cultures, and Korean industrialization from its opening. Her father Arnold’s camera focuses on Deann’s face while experimenting with distorting filters, highlighting constructedness of her visage as it is translated through the camera. The image is stamped with the time ticking off each second that passes. In a voiceover, Borshay Liem introduces herself, “My name is Kang Ok Jin, I was born on June 14, 1957.” The image changes to Deann’s laughing face into a mosaic of colors, “My name is Cha Jung Hee. I was born on November 5, 1956.” Finally, as the camera zooms away from her face, we see the frame of her father’s camera viewfinder, as she states her adoptive identity, “My name is Deann Borshay. I was born March 3, 1966, the moment I stepped off the

airplane in San Francisco. I've spoken different languages and I've had different names." In revealing her father's camera, the film cuts to Arnold passing his camera to Deann, who pans the lens onto her adoptive and biological family, and a photograph of herself as a child in her parent's living room. Arnold, an accomplished amateur filmmaker and photographer and the family's primary archivist, relinquishes his role to Deann, Borshay Liem takes to position herself as the author of this narrative.

Keenly aware of the ideological conventions of the camera, Borshay Liem revisits the memories and images that Arnold and Alveen had constructed to produce her as their daughter. This seemingly "perfect" life is thoroughly captured by Arnold, who devotedly documented his family's every day life in reels of beautiful 8mm footage and sharply composed photographs are illustrative of a vintage Americana life filled with sunny family vacations and a popular social life. These images and their stories are central to the first half of the documentary, and stage Deann's placement in the family as natural. Arnold explains how Deann's first meal with the family results in tears at the dinner table, but quickly notes, "but from then on it was perfect." The smooth incorporation of Deann into the egalitarian space of the family and the suburbs is explained not one of assimilation, but a successful transformation of idealized (white) femininity from "stoic little girl" to the titular symbols of American high school society—homecoming queen and cheerleader. Borshay Liem reveals how the adoptive family coheres through a child's assimilation, but also that narrative of assimilation is repressed to resolve difference to normalize the family.

Relying on her family's archive of films, photographs, and stories, she re-investigates these memories to reveal the alienating and "terrifying" expectations of Americanization that produced her extraordinary transformation into a Borshay and an American. In an interview in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Borshay Liem notes the significance in her father's photographic evidence in shaping her story, "I just love his movies. They're just wonderful.... But what

struck me is that his images of me are captured in the way that he wanted to see me: a happy, fully assimilated child who has no history and is completely well-adjusted. As I watched them over and over again, I realized they didn't capture the full spectrum of my experience."<sup>33</sup>

Borshay Liem's documentary renegotiates what Lacan calls the "given-to-be-seen." In *Racial Castrations*, Eng defines Lacan's concept of "the given-to-be-seen" as "that group of culturally sanctioned images against which subjects are typically held for their sense of identity."<sup>34</sup> As they assemble their experiences through memories they archive and materialize to a tangible "document," Korean adoptee autoethnographies<sup>35</sup> contest the "given-to-be-seen" of the familial archive—illuminating the absences and articulating the silences. Deann's incorporation into the family is cohered through the familial archive of images that negotiate her racial difference that makes her not part of the family by producing evidence that laminates her place in the family, which empties the adoptee of her psychic past and confines her to the photographic present.

*First Person Plural* captures this dissonance between her father's representations, and her own memories, considering the things and feelings that escape the orderly narrative of family. Borshay Liem's film discovers how the linearity of assimilation never fully reconciles the conflicting and complex personal, familial, and institutional narratives into a singular trajectory that confers identity, home, and nation, but rather in its processes critiques those very formations. For the Borshay family, Deann's official history begins with her entry into their family ("I was born March 3, 1966, the moment I stepped off the airplane in San Francisco."), who interpolate her as daughter and sister immediately upon her entry into San Francisco in 1966. Arnold's trusty 8mm camera documents Deann disembarking the plane bundled in layers of clothing, her "stoic, little face" remains unmoved as the family stoops down to welcome the newest member of their family. Her older sister Denise narrates over these scenes, "From the

moment you came here, you were my sister and we were your family that was it. ...and even though we looked different... different nationalities or whatever... we were your family.”

For the Asian immigrant, their racial difference is managed through the possibilities of citizenship, but for the Asian female adoptee, their race is recognized and resolved through the conditions of adoptive family. Denise portrays how the very tenet of Deann’s inclusion into her family is predicated by the narration of her past as a Korean orphan (“even though we looked different... different nationalities”). Alveen echoes this misperception: “To us an orphanage meant that you had no family.” Robert G. Lee writes, “The family is the primary metaphor for the nation.” And continues, “The family is also the primary ideological apparatus, the central system of symbols, through which the state contains and manages contradictions in the social structure. It is the principal social unit through which the individual can become a national subject....”<sup>36</sup> The dominant perception of Asian children available for adoption was that they were orphans who were constructed as parentless. The construction of the adoptee as an orphan was imperative to foster the heteronormative order of the American family and the U.S. nation-state. In other words, the orphan should only have one mother, one father, and thus, one nation. Moreover, the Korean orphan is seen antecedent to subjectivity—a person without an identity, name, family, and citizenship, and her adoption into the family supported American exceptionalism transforming her from “waifish” orphan to adoptee to American to modern individual.<sup>37</sup> The very conditions—personal and structural—of her arrival into the U.S and her subsequent integration are suppressed under the sentimentalism of family.<sup>38</sup>

While the Borshays incorporate Deann into the family upon her arrival into the U.S, the film tracts against such hopeful promises of filial immediacy. Instead, we observe Deann continually disrupting this adoptive bond by demonstrating assimilation as a discursive process where affiliations and identifications are not only directed at hegemonic ideals. Arnold and Alveen joyfully remember the ease of Deann’s incorporation into their family, but this

perception of the family's smooth transition represented by Deann's diligence takes a toll as the rigor of her labor consumes her body. Over a scene of a young Deann industriously planting marigolds in the garden, Arnold explains: "You were so determined to learn, I guess to please us or whatever I'm not sure. You actually made yourself ill and you became jaundiced—you had gotten kind of yellow-looking—and the only thing we could think of was that you were really trying too hard and were trying too hard." It is ironic Deann's illness from assimilation, manifests in a disease that physically colors her "yellow"—the racial color of Asianness.

I noted in chapter 2 how Anne Anlin Cheng theorizes "hypochondria," as a motif in Asian American literature that manifests as an effect of assimilation. According to Cheng, "Hypochondria is often staged...as a response to racism, not only from others but also from self: *an illness close to, and of home.*"<sup>39</sup> She adds later, "*Hypochondria is a way of perceiving the world and one's body with respect to social relations*" (author's emphasis).<sup>40</sup> While Arnold interprets Deann's labors as a sign of her determination to please her parents and become part of the family, maybe we can read Deann's "yellowness" as a protective response against assimilation's potential amnesia. For Cheng, illness protects oneself against assimilation's failure to belong and adhere to normative ideals, and in turn generates "modes of perception" that "mark[s] a profound conflation between realness and fantasy," our lived conditions and our desires.<sup>41</sup> Through Cheng's insights, we can re-read assimilation as not only a process of loss, replacement, or exchange, but also as a way to apprehend and negotiate one's ideal and denigrated self. In doing so, it makes comparisons and identifications not only to dominant cultural ideals (i.e. whiteness), but also to the abject and the subversive.

Theories of assimilation are rooted within the discipline of sociology, and most notably through the studies of Robert E. Park and the Chicago School from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Park, his colleagues, and students researched for ways to comprehend what they saw as a shifting moment of im/migration that produced racial and cultural intersections that

constituted the emergence of modern America.<sup>42</sup> Imminent in their studies was to understand the possibility of these diverse and perverse populations to be funneled into the presence of America and its modern ideals. A person marked by racial, gender, and sexual differences was determined to have potential to become an assimilated and modern subject firstly if they seemed capable of psychic and cultural effacement of essentialized behaviors rooted in racialized cultures. In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, David Palumbo-Liu gathers the multiple definitions of assimilation authored under Park summarizing:

The convergence of territory and contiguity, culture, and national ‘existence,’ endows assimilation with a particular identity and social function—it is to vouchsafe the smooth operation of the national in reproducing itself coextensively in mind, body, and space. This reproduction is to be manifested in a particular morphology, wherein the psychological element is crucial. The national is to be secured by a specific process of memory transfer: the migrant’s past is to be rescripted and given a content of secondhand histories and values, integrated with his or her own into a functioning psychic reality, and this will allow the state to continue its course through modernity. We find again the particular coalition of territory, memory, history, and nationhood. Although the precise nature of the ‘sharing’ of experience and memories of them does not come forward in these sociological definitions, the very presence of such a concept discloses the centrality of a particular *mentality* to any notion of assimilation to ‘America.’<sup>43</sup>

Palumbo-Liu’s assessment that the psychic is a necessary function for assimilation seems to convey the ominous homogenization of subjectivities that are to be collected under a unified experience and memory to “sustain a national existence.” Under Park’s observations despite the visual cues that marked the Oriental’s assimilation into American society, his completion was continually impeded by his “racial uniform,”<sup>44</sup> thus the psychic space became an important place to evaluate Asian assimilation in American life. If the Oriental is delayed for full embodiment in America, and the psychic is the space that must be totalized to produce him as a successfully assimilated subject, it already seems to point to the impossibility of its project. Through psychoanalytic scholarship by Eng, Cheng, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and others, the psychic emerges as an infinitely complex terrain that contains memories, ideas, knowledges, images, songs, and so forth that we cannot cognitively realize, and that does not always emerge

in our embodiments or social life.<sup>45</sup> If canonical sociology's neatly packaged definitions of assimilation rely upon the psychic as the central place for transformation, it inadvertently notes the inherent slippages and fissures that are produced through memory and fantasy during assimilation.

Deann's racial difference, which is highlighted from the labors of assimilation, surfaces as a physical desire to assimilate to something else. Deann's ideal at this moment is not necessarily to be part of her new family but rather, discerns other desires such as to return "home." This becomes apparent when Deann's proficiency in English equips her to tell her mother the truth—that she is not an orphan. Going against the injunction of the orphanage director who advises her never to say anything until "she could take care of herself," Deann tells her mother. She recounts to the camera:

When I had learned enough English to talk to my parents, I decided that I should tell them who I really was. I remember going up to my mother telling her, 'I'm not who you think I am, I'm not Cha Jung Hee. And I think I have a mother and brother and sisters in Korea still.' And she turned to me and said, 'Oh, honey, you've been dreaming. You don't have a mother. And you never had brothers and sisters. Look at these adoption documents. It says that you're Cha Jung Hee and your mother died giving birth to you.' And she said, 'You know what, this is just a natural part of you getting used to living in a new country. Don't worry about it. They're just bad dreams. They're going to go away soon.'

The camera pans over the evidence—documents as well as the films and photographs—that designate her as an orphan, an adoptee, and a Borshay. Deann's acquisition of English gives her the ability to articulate to her adoptive mother the existence of another mother and family, but memory and language is subordinated to the "document." Anthropologist Eleana Kim writes, "Written, 'official' documentation and photographs are exhibited as visible evidence of a pre-adoption past, artifacts pointing to a place and time beyond language, lost in memory too deep and too distant to be easily retrieved. The indexical quality of the photograph, and the 'truth' value of the paper document stand as semiotically vacant, yet ontologically powerful, evidentiary objects."<sup>46</sup> Archival evidence not only trumps memory (and language), but also



intends to affirm identity to eliminate other possibilities of histories, families, and subjectivities rendering other types of knowledges as fictive.

Alveen diagnoses Deann's claim of another family as an effect of assimilation ("this is a natural part of you getting used to living in a new country"), a nightmare that will disappear as soon as she is fully assimilated signifying how citizenship like family means refusing and anesthetizing the possibilities of other affiliations that cannot be represented to reinforce the heteronormative institution of the family and the nation. While assimilation is normally defined as the process in which extraneous knowledges and subjectivities that exceed the terms of the nation and family are resolved, it is because of her assimilation that Deann is able to articulate affiliations that contradict the normative contracts of family. Despite Alveen's desires to discipline Deann's dreams—forms of memory and fantasy constantly exceeds its authority.

In the following scene Deann attempts to halt the intended temporality of assimilation in order to remember "home." She states over an image of her birth name—Kang Ok Jin—being written in brush calligraphy, "I think at some point as a child I made a decision that I would never forget Korea. Every now and again, I would stop whatever I was doing, close my eyes and picture the road from the orphanage to the house." Yet, the recollection of how to get home can only exist within the geography of Korea—from the orphanage to the house, reflecting im/migration as a different type of journey for adoptees—one is magically transported from one place, plopped into another. Deann's imagined route portrays the rupture between America and Korea—the only way for Deann to get "home" is to be in Korea. Deann's assimilation into America is preface for her desire return to Korea, but the possibility of returning to her Korean family can only exist if she never left Korea. To put it in the words of Stuart Hall, "Migration is a one-way trip. There is no 'home' to go back to. There never was."<sup>47</sup> The fantasy of home exists through the condition of immigration, and assimilation. The conundrum of the immigrant as an adoptee is not necessarily the foreboding

loss assumed through assimilation's narrative, but what else might be known—portraying how it generates knowledges, which renders personhood more complicated and affiliation and loyalties can no longer be so easily determined categorically, biologically, and nationally.

III: "It wasn't a joke when I said I migrated in order to get away from my family. I did. The problem, one discovers, is that since one's family is already 'in here,' there is no other way in which you can actually leave them."  
—Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves"

Assimilation does not result in loss and conformity, instead it is a contested process that portends creative measures that challenge normative ways to be and belong. Deann's assimilation is a process that both defies *and* concedes to its authorized amnesia,<sup>48</sup> portraying the contradictory and multiple productions of subjectivity that are formed in its course. By challenging dominant understandings of assimilation that assume immigrants gain identity through identifications to heteronormative formations of family, home, and nation, which supports the reconciliatory ideals of the nation and naturalizes the Asian immigrant's dyadic place in the nation through its sameness/difference."

During an emotional moment, Borshay Liem confronts her adoptive mother, Alveen, and asks her why she never reached out to her during a time of depression that resulted after the discovery of her biological family in Korea. The mother and daughter are sitting in a hotel room in Korea, where they have traveled to meet Deann's biological mother and family for the first time together. Alveen is at a loss for words, and finally says, "I don't know... maybe I was afraid you'd tell me... maybe I was afraid to know... I was afraid to lose you." The prospect of knowing reveals the fragility of the adoptive family, and recognizes the knowledges that cannot be subsumed to make someone not their family, not their daughter, and not their mother, and results in formations of belonging, kinship, and subjectivity that portrays the process of affiliation and identification as hybrid and multiple rather than singular and "real." Far from an empirical and regulatory objective sense of knowledge, "to know" unsettles narrative stability in the seemingly obvious images from the family's life, which results in reckoning with uneasy

discoveries—two photographs of different girls with the same name, another mother, a daughter’s grief, and the impossibility of being a “real mother” or even a “real daughter.”

In *First Person Plural*, the very idea of two mothers poses the unsettling task of negotiating narratives of the national, familial, and its attendant constructs of identity. For Borshay Liem, this aberrant formation of family that has resulted from her adoption impels her visit to Korea with her adoptive parents. Explaining the conundrum of two mothers to the camera, she states, “I had a particular difficulty talking to my American mother about my Korean mother.... I didn’t know how to talk about my mother with my mother because she was my mother.” To see both mothers in one room seems to promise logical coherence: “I felt if I could actually see them come together in real life that somehow both families could live within myself.” We observe how the hegemonic imagination of family and nation as heteronormative limits the prospect of comprehending something different, and it is only by *seeing* two mothers side by side that offers the possibility of affectively grasping an odd image of two mothers and two families of different biological, racial, ethnic, and national registers as “living within herself.”<sup>49</sup> But following Stuart Hall’s remark that opens this section, “The problem, one discovers, is that since one’s family is already ‘in here,’ there is no other way in which you can actually leave them.” What becomes complicated for the transnational adoptee is that family is nonnormative, but also unnatural (not just biologically). For Borshay, while the problem is situated as a search for a “real mother,” it is really to comprehend her own hybrid and “plural” personhood. In following such considerations, I argue that the immigrant as adoptee offers a consideration of family, and in turn, home as *deliberate* formations, which promises imaginative forms of kinship, belonging, and personhood that are queer, heterogeneous, and verging on “queasy.” While Borshay Liem considers such possibilities of family are predicated on “seeing,” in the film, we observe that “seeing” is to conclude with appointing one mother as “real.” In this regard, I contend that queer and nonnormative

formations of belonging are unrepresentable within a “national symbolic economy,”<sup>50</sup> and remain imperceptible and abstract.

### Three Girls

One of the crucial moments in *First Person Plural* narrates Deann’s discovery of two photographs. Haunted by visions and dreams of what she concludes as “Korea,” Deann decides to investigate her adoption documents, and uncovers two portraits depicting different girls with the same name—Cha Jung Hee. The images are shown in juxtaposition, and we register one image as clearly resembling Deann, while the other portrays someone else.<sup>51</sup>

Remember when Deann claims the existence of another mother, Alveen relies on her adoption papers to prove Deann’s identity as Cha Jung Hee, an orphan, and affirm her own identity as her mother. In this instance, we see how, ironically, photographic evidence ruptures the narrative that the Borshays constructed in order to make Deann their daughter.

Cha Jung Hee was initially introduced to the Borshays when Alveen became inspired by a piece on Korean orphans on *The Gary Moore Show*. Arnold Borshay’s new success in the cold war economy’s real estate business had left them feeling charitable, and the family began donating fifteen dollars a month to World Vision. In return, Alveen would receive letters and photographs from Cha Jung Hee and her caretaker, and through these transactions, Alveen developed an affective attachment to the child. She explains to Deann, “we became attached to *you* through the mail,” unaware of the slippage.

Cha Jung Hee figures spectrally throughout the film haunting both Deann and her adoptive family—she is who Deann should be—an orphan—and also what Deann can never be—without a mother.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Deann’s search for her “real mother” is made complicated because her adoptive subjectivity—Deann Borshay—is predicated upon her configuration as an orphan—Cha Jung Hee—and the effacement of her biological identity—Kang Ok Jin. The identification of a real mother is difficult because it is unclear what part of Deann is “real.” The

girls and mothers plot a crisis of narrative stability for the adoptive family, who almost wishes their daughter Deann is Cha Jung Hee instead of Kang Ok Jin. This is apparent in the ways both Alveen and her sister Denise both dismiss her biological identity as Kang Ok Jin, and continually interpellate her as Cha Jung Hee or Deann firmly identifying her as an orphan (“Cha Jung Hee”) and as an adoptee (“Deann Borshay”). As her mother adamantly states, “Well, I didn’t care that they had switched child on us, you couldn’t have been loved more, and suddenly just because you weren’t Cha Jung Hee and you were Ok Jin Kang, Kong—or whatever—it didn’t matter to me. You were Deann and you were mine.” (Meanwhile, in a separate scene, Denise asks Deann what her other name was, and states that Deann is still “Cha Jung Hee.”) Deann responds to Alveen’s assertions of loving ownership with anguish because this is exactly what she wishes to Alveen to comprehend—that “they had switched a child on” them. Alveen’s construct of Deann and her daughter depends on her being Cha Jung Hee, a persona she inhabited only in the context of the Borshays’ imagination.

At the beginning of this chapter, I used Stephanie Vandergosh from Justin Lin’s film *Better Luck Tomorrow* to describe the ways the Asian female orphan/adoptee is used to imagine the heteronormative possibilities of Asian American incorporation into the nation. In patriarchal readings, if Asian immigrant woman are perceived to forestall the integration of Asian American men as normative subjects of the nation-state, then the Asian female adoptee/orphan, in her abstraction from Asia—her motherland, presents the possibility of reproducing the community that naturalizes Asian American heteronormative masculinity as American. If we consider how immigrants’ integration into the nation is through absolving their attachments to their mother-country, for Asian female orphans/adoptees their possibility for integration into the family and the nation is dependent on the absence of the Asian mother. Yet, what is compelling in the discovery of the two photographs, is that despite one being the “real” Cha Jung Hee and other Kang Ok Jin, Deann’s biological identity, both constitute

Deann's subjectivity. In many ways Cha Jung Hee is almost as much Deann as Kang Ok Jin as much as Deann, pointing out how her subjectivity is continually defined by larger institutional forces that cannot be reconciled through the heteronormative family and the nation-state—as symbolized through Deann naming one mother her “Korean mother” and her other “American.” Deann’s journey to Korea is an attempt to reconcile these fissures of family and subjectivity, but as we see knowledges and fantasies exceed the heteronormative conditions in which we would like to make families.

### Making Families

While the first third of the film portrays Deann’s assimilation as producing identifications and memories that challenge her subjectivity as an orphan and adoptee, there’s a shift when those memories and desires to remember another family or Korea dissipates, as she states, “It was getting more and more difficult to remember how to get home. I remember closing my eyes and saying, ‘Don’t forget.’ But the last memory of Korea was starting to fade.” Borshay Liem portrays how assimilation also operates to sublimate memories of Korea and her family as she learns to mimic racialized and gendered ideals. Deann explains her attempts to look like her adoptive sister. In particular, it was Denise’s “perfect eyes” that she wanted to emulate. We focus on photographs of Deann’s eyes carefully applied with baby blue shadow and willful lashes that extend out of her lids compared against Denise’s “perfect eyes.” Denise states in voiceover, how her friends would remark that as sisters they “looked so much alike.” Unlike Denise’s friends who elide the obvious racial differences through their familial relation, Duncan approaches things differently, “You didn’t come from my mommy’s womb. You don’t have the family eyes, you have the family smile. Color and look doesn’t make any difference. It’s who you are. You’re my sister.” Deann’s relationship to her family is noted both by sentiments of difference (“family eyes”) and sameness (“family smile), but it is the sameness that is supposed to be privileged over difference when both are central to their relationship.<sup>53</sup>

The film revolves around these mis-recognitions of family, which become profound once Deann and her adoptive parents arrive to Korea. Deann desires for her biological mother to recognize her as her daughter. Deann's biological mother desires for her to recognize Alveen as her mother, and Alveen desires for Deann to recognize her as her mother. This triangulated relationship reveals how normative protocols of kinship limit possibilities of belonging and affiliation as a multiple and heterogeneous. Deann can only claim one mother, and only one mother can claim Deann. This proposes the most anxieties for Alveen, who is always reminding Deann how she belongs to her and their life in America. As the three Borshays sit in the back of a van winding through the congested streets of Korea, Deann asks Alveen and Arnold, "Can you see me here?" Alveen immediately replies, "No, you belong to us in America." Alveen's dismissal is reflective of her own anxieties of motherhood that must deny Deann's relationship to Korea. In the film, Alveen claims her filiation to Deann by establishing her role as her mother ("I am your mother") and the naming of Deann as "Deann" or "Cha Jung Hee." Yet, throughout the entire film, Alveen never calls Deann her daughter. For Alveen and Deann, the unrepresentability of their kinship coalesces around photographs, films, and the falsified adoption documents, but outside of those confines their relationship is misrecognized and requires explanation. Alveen states, "People would look and ask, but we didn't care." For Alveen and the Borshay family, "not caring" is eminent in order to manage the differences that are so painfully obvious.

It is not that her family does not see the racial differences that constitute the family as incoherent, it's her family's willful desire not to acknowledge them to maintain and uphold their familial relationship as natural, to convince Deann that she is indeed their sister and daughter. As Duncan states, "It's *who* you are. You're my sister." At the same time, we learn it is also who *else* she is that makes her another family's sister. Borshay Liem points out that while such elisions are well-intentioned, the erasures of racial differences might enable constructs of

family, but also suppresses the meanings, histories, identities, and fantasies that constitute one's personhood also obstructing the possibility of family. Highlighting the exceedingly unnatural and conditional formation of her adoptive family, Borshay Liem notes how the adoptive family is bound by contract not by the "tenacity" of blood and biology constructing a different kind of family. The tenuous relationship is further exacerbated by adulthood as she no longer requires her parents for survival. She explains:

There's a way in which I see my parents as my parents. But sometimes I look at them and I see two white American people that are so different from me that I can't fathom how we are related to each other and how it can be possible that these people could be my parents. When they adopted me they really accepted me as their child and I really became part of their family even though I wasn't related to them by blood it was as if I had been born to them. As a child I accepted them as my parents because I depended on them for survival but as an adult I don't think I have accepted them as my parents and I think that's part of the distance I've been feeling with them for a lot of years.

Compared to the Borshays, for Deann it is the racial difference (her "eyes") that she privileges instead of the affective continuities ("family smile") that complicates her identifications to her adoptive family. Her adoptive family's refusal to acknowledge Deann's "distance," is a refusal to understand that she is not Cha Jung Hee or that she is Kang Ok Jin. Likewise Deann's inability to see her adoptive family as her family is reveals her adherence to regulatory practices of identity that mandate her to identify with only one real mother, defined by biology and racial/ethnic continuity.

This is central to Deann's psychic dilemma—the impossibility to neatly identify to an identity is also the impossibility to discover a "real" mother; or, inversely, the possibility to comprehend her subjectivity as susceptible, messy, and multiple. Her trip to Korea is to resolve the problem of having two families, but the visit to her biological family's house in Kunsan only exacerbates the possibility of identifying a "real" mother, family, home, and nation. As families gather together for the first time, the conversation between the Borshays and Deann



and her biological family is facilitated through a translator, and the scene communicates the complexities of such a resolve for the “real.”

In her journey to name a mother, David Eng notes how Deann experiences rejection as a daughter by both mothers. He writes, “[T]he initial trauma of Borshay Liem’s transnational adoption is not just reenacted but redoubled through her initial rejection of the (white) mother and, in turn, her own repeated rejection by *both* mothers.”<sup>54</sup> As the families settle in her Deann’s eldest brother’s home, Alveen remarks to Deann, “You look like your mother.” The translator conveys this to her biological mother, who responds, “It’s natural because she’s my daughter.” Eng reads this as a moment of rejection by her adoptive mother, but I re-read it as Alveen’s acknowledgement of Deann’s other mother. I stated earlier that Alveen is “afraid to know” the things that potentially antagonize her relationship to Deann, but here, we see Alveen concede to those knowledges.

In what Eng signals as the second scene of rejection, Deann’s biological mother tells Deann that “I only gave birth to you, your parents raised you, I want you to be happy with your parents, your adoptive parents” (my translation); this sentiment is restated in English by the translator, “She [the birth mother] says that although she is your mother, she only gave birth to you so you should really love and do everything you can for your adoptive parents . . . She wants you to be happy with your parents, your adopted parents.” Eng writes, “At this imperative, we see Borshay Liem wince. Having rejected her white mother, Borshay Liem, in turn, is rejected” (26). Rather than reading these scenes as moments of rejection by her mothers, I read it as her biological mother’s ability to identify the various roles and relationships that both women have to Deann—she recognizes Alveen’s role as the mother who nurtured her compared to her role as the mother that bore her (“It’s natural because she’s my daughter.”). Her biological mother acknowledges the different relationships that define Deann as her daughter and not her daughter. After all, she never says that she isn’t her mother.

Deann's sadness seethes through these scenes as she grapples to comprehend her place in Korea, and it seems that such grief results from the excess of mothers, and her inability to have a, for a lack of a better word, promiscuous approach to motherhood, family, and subjectivity.

Deann suffers from the expectation that psychic stability is conferred through heteronormative formations of family and identity that are defined as natural, continuous, and same, but in the film's conclusions, we see how the process of making family and, as an extension, the nation can often be deliberate, and unnatural. At the end, Deann realizes she decides who her "real" mother is. In the hotel room, Deann admits that she "thinks" Alveen is her "real" mother. Such conclusions seem to be afforded by the impossibility of restoring her biological family: "When I was younger, I held onto this fantasy if I was good enough... that if everything was perfect and I behaved properly that I would somehow be sent back to live with my Korean family... that childhood fantasy is getting away from me... and I have to develop a different kind of relationship with my family.... it's approaching them as an adult." Likewise, Alveen acknowledges that Deann "is definitely Korean, but definitely American." Alveen's new construct of Deann defies the heteronormative condition of family and nation, which cannot recognize her daughter as both.

Familial bonds are forged by histories, memories, and im/migration, which cannot use "love" to pre-empt difference, but are deeply cognitive and sentient of its presence. The impetus to normalize familial relationships through a variety of conventions from the family portraiture (Deann's father's images) to naming (Duncan, Denise, and Deann) attempts to reconcile the overwhelming difference of a child that does not look like anybody else in the family. But what is represented in the family portrait can never adequately render and represent the complexities of these relationships. What these formations of kinship and family-making might help us understand are that perhaps unnatural or queer formations of family are an important epistemological configuration that might rigorously consider the implications of the

heterogeneous formations (i.e. racial/gender/political/sexual differences) that occur in the domestic and personal confines of our home that challenge the impulse to absolve the contradictions in exchange for unity and coherence. In transracial and transnational adoptions, management of racial difference through rhetorics of colorblindness, multiculturalism, and normativity are also strategies to help bridge the nonbiological gaps of the family, and thus, the nation. The film portrays that these differences always exceed such attempts and produce disidentifications that make someone not their mother, not their sister, and not their daughter. In turn, those disidentifications offer familial bonds and constructs of home that do not belie difference but rather sees its manifestations as new ways to define family.

Desires for inclusion into the national sphere are available through claims of legal and cultural citizenship that are often symbolized and valorized through the “immigrant,” and his assimilative possibilities. Asian adoptees are often abstracted from narratives of immigration, and thus assimilation. As such, their insertion especially into white families and transformation as Americans is portrayed as natural and immediate. As noted through Lowe’s scholarship in *Immigrant Acts*, the figure of the Asian immigrant woman in its fictive and lived forms critiques the universalizing tendencies of representative forms of belonging. “The immigrant as adoptee” extends this insight, and portrays how attempts to represent the process of affiliation as unnatural processes that exceed biology, origin, and reveals belonging as complicated inventions and experiences. Deann and Alveen both conclude on what Kandice Chuh refers to as a “transnational sensibility”— an epistemological formation recognizes *and* imagines that one daughter can belong to more than one mother, or as Eng suggests, perhaps not even have a mother.

We come to understand that such bonds are constructed through the acknowledgement of differences rather than conceding to what might seem to be their natural order. The documentary begins with Deann trying to identify “family” through normative

conventions that are rooted in national and in turn, heteronormative discourses, which ultimately presents a choice of one or the other that is cognitively limiting and affectively oppressive. The documentary ends with Deann naming Alveen as her real mother, but in an interview following the production of the film, she extends her definition of “real mother”:

“Before, I had tried to look at the experience in very black-and-white terms. My Korean mother was my real mother; my American mother—I wasn't sure. But the definition of real is subjective and has changed for me. I like to hold both sets of families as real to me now.”<sup>55</sup> In some ways, her final sentiment that both families are her “real family” is not one that can be represented within the confines of the documentary. The film instead concludes with Deann pasting pictures of herself with her husband and her son in a photo album revealing the production of her own nuclear family.<sup>56</sup> Eng describes this final scene, “[B]orshay Liem’s ‘cure’ to her dilemma of two mothers does not move beyond either notions of the singular or the traditional structures of family and kinship. Rather, this marriage allows her to create and to inhabit a conventional nuclear family structure of her own, to make good on what she believes she never had” (29). It is true, the documentary reaffirms the heteronormative structures of family and kinship. While a “queer” family picture depicting Borshay with her adoptive mother and biological mother circulated around the press and in its PR materials during its run at film festivals around the country and its syndication on PBS, the portrait might offer legibility to such a familial construct, it does not adequately portray the complexities in which these affiliations are made and named.

Chuh’s reading of Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* is useful to understand how alternative formations of belonging might escape representation, she writes:

Home and family, metaphors for national belongingness, are reconstituted in *Blu’s Hanging* as processes that occur in negotiation with but in difference from heteronormativity. In other words, this newly formed family that augurs a hopeful future in *Blu’s Hanging* is ‘queer’ in the sense that David Eng has used the term to designate an alternative to the naturalized, heteronormativity, masculinist, social and political configurations installed by U.S. hegemonic

nationalism. In this sense, I would argue that Yamanaka articulates what might be conceived as a transnational sensibility, one that recognizes and yet imagines the material effectivity of the foundational epistemological structures (like heteronormativity) of the U.S. nation. Transnational here names a space that eludes conscription by the national imaginary, and one in which practices of subjectivity that cannot be represented within a national symbolic economy might find legibility.<sup>57</sup>

As we saw through the Borshay family archive that is central to the first half of the film, representations portray both the limitations and the desires of ideals of family, nation, and subjectivity. The image of Deann with her two mothers represents the three women together, but is still contingent on its narrative to acknowledge their relationship as filial. Disappointed by the conclusion of Borshay Liem's film, Eng turns to a different kind of representational possibility that I take to task. In his reading of a John Hancock commercial depicting a lesbian couple's receiving their Chinese daughter at the airport, he writes, "We exist in a time when transnational adoption of Chinese baby girls by white lesbians can be aired on primetime television during the Olympics. In this representation lies a nascent possibility, the possibility that this child might grow up to exist in a world where the psychic structures of two—indeed, three, four, or perhaps no—mothers of various could be accommodated. Let us try to *imagine*—indeed, to *live*—these other possibilities, these other possible structures."<sup>58</sup> Eng sees the hope in seeing a lesbian couple receiving their Chinese daughter at the airport as a promising moment of American mainstream media to represent such a familial possibility. What is important is that these structures are *imagined* and *lived*, but are limited in its representations alone, and "cannot be represented within a national symbolic economy might find legibility." As the coda to Borshay Liem's film conveys, sentiments of other possibilities are not always so easy to represent through the photographs and films that constitute the family especially since for the adoptee that representation of family, history, and nation always seems to note what's different, absent, and unknown.

To think of the immigrant as an adoptee, challenges the natural trajectory of assimilation and renders that trajectory as a site of contestation that is fictive. Moreover, it sees assimilation as a process that does not produce inevitable and determined outcomes. This is why in the narration of Deann's assimilation we see the production of "perverse" knowledges that challenge normative formations of family and nation.

#### **IV. Fictive Frictions**

This chapter contends how examining the immigrant as an adoptee reconfigures dominant discourses of assimilation that reads it as a process of loss and conformity. Through a close reading of *First Person Plural*, I argue how assimilation is a process that generates knowledges, which challenge heteronormative identifications to family and home. In doing so, it considers formations of belonging that comprehend the complexities of social relations that are mindful of differences rather than subsuming or disciplining them. Likewise, I suggested that pictures and films often cannot adequately represent the complexities of nonnormative relationships. Extending those sentiments I want to conclude this chapter with a brief discussion on how the cultural practices of Korean adoptees portray the necessity of looking at the absences and what Avery Gordon calls "ghostly haunts," and generates fictive tensions, which dissemble the transparency in representing identity.

Turning back to David Eng's article, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," he states that one of the greatest losses that Asian adoptees experience is the inability to participate in the communal nature of racial melancholia. Expanding on Freud's studies on mourning and melancholia, "racial melancholia" describes the "social and psychic structures of loss emerging from Asian immigrant experiences" of "immigration, assimilation, and racialization."<sup>59</sup> What Asians in the U.S.—immigrants and those who are born here—mourn is the inability to attain and maintain both Asian ideals—culture, language, and family—as well as American bourgeois ideals—citizenship, race, and sense of home. According to Freud,

melancholia is resolved when the lost object is replaced, but for Asian American subjects the loss of Asian ideals can never be recovered and the attainment of another ideal—such as recognition as American or even Asian American remains ambivalent. This lingering absence of a loss object (Asian-ness) and the inability to replace this with a new object (American-ness or even Asian Americanness) produces a melancholic relationship to one's sense of identity as one is not quite Asian and never quite American. For Asian Americans this is further exacerbated because Asian and American remain antagonistic to each other, thus the desire for recognition even as a distinctly "Asian American" subject seems impossible. Eng writes how racial melancholia is then a "normal experience" for Asian Americans. While I have noted how adoptive families normally depend on reconciling differences to constitute family, Asian American families are normally narrated as being exacerbated by differences of cultures, morals, and ways of living. These dominant narratives in Asian American culture are generally read through the lens of intergenerational differences. Eng notes how Asian American families who have immigrated to the U.S. who participate in "intergenerational and intersubjective negotiation of loss" because children and parents *both* negotiate and witness their experience of racial difference against normative ideals. Comparatively, as noted in *First Person Plural*, the adoptive child is unable to participate in familial experiences of loss and racial difference because her family is usually unable to recognize or associate with the racial difference ("Color doesn't make a difference."), or defers it to affective measures such as "love" or familial histories of nurture ("You have the family smile"). We have to understand that recognition of racial difference is not just about the experience of prejudicial behavior such as name-calling, but the more profound ways racial difference manifests from insidious forms of structural racism to the experience of loss.

The act of remembering or its inverse, anxieties of forgetting, is central to the formation of transnational adoptive communities that are alienated from normative notions of

family, nation, ethnicity, and race. The cultural practices of Korean adoptees from memoirs, films both fictional narrative and documentary, rely on the fragments and the absences of memories, photographs, and official documents to critique how nationalist ideologies produce cultural homogeneity that limit definitions of family, home, and nation as discrete realities.<sup>60</sup> These projects, often categorized as “autoethnography,” theorize assimilation, memory, belonging, and difference that complicate the normalizing processes of national and familial cultures as well as racial and ethnic identity. Eleana Kim writes how the “Korean adoptee autoethnography performs a necessary, and indeed, existentially urgent cultural work. These texts exist as forms of cultural memory, and in their polyvocality, perform a dialogic reconstruction of the past.”<sup>61</sup> Acts of storytelling are central to a community, whose lives as we noted in the introduction of Borshay Liem’s film and its title, are multiple—from airplane, document, and biological births—assembled of memories, paperwork, and families challenging conventions of time and space. Volkman writes how the cultural practices of Korean adoptees have enabled rethinking the practices of family-making, adoptee assimilation, and racial and ethnic identification in transnational and transracial adoption. She writes, “The voices of these Korean adoptees, adopted at a time when for the most part their Koreanness was suppressed, have been extraordinarily influential in shaping the consciousness of adoptive families in the 1990s. Long silenced, Korean adoptees are now seen as articulate pioneers: producers of ‘autoethnographic’ film and video, creators of such collective practices in worldwide gatherings of Korean adoptees.”<sup>62</sup> These narratives are central to community building, and important in theorizing complicated issues like the trauma of separation, the erasure of personal history, and the affect of racial difference.

While Eng suggests that adoptees do not have familial structures of loss, debilitating their process of mourning, we can see how the production of autoethnographic projects by Korean adoptees is a vital venue in which this communal, intersubjective and inter- and intra-



generational grieving occurs. This is probably most evident through the ever-expanding communities developed through online forums and adoptee websites organized and developed and maintained by adult Korean adoption organizations like U.S.-based AKConnection and Also-Known-As to ones that are politically-minded such as the Korea-based Truth and Reconciliation for Adoption Community of Korea (TRACK) rely on sharing personal stories of adoptees as well as collecting “archival” evidences. These materials sourced from personal papers as well as libraries are shared on websites to knit together histories, memories, documents, and information that challenge reductive readings of the adoptive subject as a subject of “need” and “home.” Eminent in the personal stories organizations such as TRACK and websites such as Transracial Abductees and the personal sites of activists such as Sunny Jo publish are critiques of dominant narratives of the transnational Korean adoptee as Borshay Liem describes in her film, “an orphan with no history, and no past.” Instead, they illuminate readings of adoptive subjects as one produced through multiple intersecting axis such as adoptee, immigrant, race, gender, or sexuality, which portray the material, social, and historical conditions that lend her discursive legibility.

As we noted in *First Person Plural* such claims to a past or another history are continually at odds with visible evidences of the family archive, and often rely on the discoveries that emerge at the margins of official documentation, family stories, or just appear as real-life ghosts. Challenging the positivism of sociological “research” and its methodologies of visibility, Avery Gordon contends that the study of society must include its absent presences she describes as ghosts and hauntings that intervene the conventions of disciplinarity, real, and evidence. According to Gordon, looking at the “ghosts,” offers a compelling way to approach sociology’s and generally, society’s methodological deficiencies, which relies on collecting evidences to produce knowledges of subjectivity and social life dependent on the real. For example, as stated previously, we see how the Borshay family archive serves to subjectify

Deann as their (adoptive) daughter. This approach to reading, analyzing, and interrogating the “ghostly haunts” and “seething absences” is important since research in transnational adoption has historically been situated within the fields of sociology and psychology, which has privileged their studies towards the interests of adoptive parents. What seems eminent to adoptee autoethnographies is contending with the “ghostly haunts” and “seething presences” that make it impossible to neatly cohere subjectivity and its narratives.

To this end, I want to emphasize how ironically the film’s search for the “real” (mother, home, nation) is propelled a visitation of a ghost. In other words, rather than read the documentary (or other adoptee cultural practices) and its conclusions as narrating or reflecting the “real,” there is a fictive friction that is central to acts of remembering and its attendant process—the fears of forgetting—that portrays the limits of visibility and representation. In exploring the limits of representations and the “real,” it apprehends the “fictive constructs of family” and forms of subjectivity that are persistently challenged by normative narrations of History and Identity that depend on visibility to make its claims.

In the middle of the documentary, Borshay Liem states it became difficult for her to “remember,” remarking how the memories of Korea “fade” and become “forgotten” becoming “relegated...to the category of dreams.” The pivotal moment of re-remembering occurs is when Deann leaves her adoptive family home to go to college. The departure from home prompts flashes of images and dreams of what she speculates is Korea, but the ultimate spectral scene occurs when an innocuous drive on the streets of Berkeley turns into a haunting by her Korean father, who appears in the passenger seat. Deann narrates this moment of terror as “the moment I would’ve probably gone to the other side.” The scene is fascinating as it notes that despite her assimilation and transformation in becoming “American as hot dogs and apple pie” appears as a completed process, we see how ghosts unexpectedly materialize to challenge identity as a stable place of arrival. It is the spectral visit that prompts her own

examination of the same documents that Alveen used to reject her claims of another mother and family, and her discovery of the pictures of two different girls with the same name.

What is also intriguing are the knowledges that Deann puts forth always seem at tension with her “forgetting.” She states, “At some point, I forgot everything.” If she did forget everything, how does she later remember that she did tell Alveen that she had another family, or did she know that the ghost was her biological father? Was the ghost real? As Eng notes, many of Deann’s recollections and sentiments are predicated with a logical and, at times, an emotional qualifier, “I think...” or “I feel...” It is never certain what Deann knows, constantly evoking a fictive tension within her stories or thoughts. While the film is loaded with material evidence—photographs, official documents, personal letters, filmed footage, from past and present, there is an overwhelming sense of doubt that narrates the past as well as the future, and much of the doubt is produced by an overdetermined amount of knowledge and its attendant absences—what else is known. Her sense of knowledge is always uncertain yet seems to disrupt the very narrative set forth by the documents that sediment her identity as such. I highlight this not to place doubts about Borshay Liem’s experience or whether or not these things *actually* happened. Instead, I see these fictive tensions as productive sites to engage the possibilities and social critiques that emerge through the disciplinary processes of immigration, assimilation, and subjectivity. In many ways, through *First Person Plural*, the immigrant as adoptee attempts to apprehend the mysterious and ghostly affects of assimilation’s will, the fantasies, stories, and memories that exceed the conditions of family, nation, and identifications to mothers. The regulatory practices of identity attempt to resolve the complexity of personhood and its ghosts, to find logic and reason, facts and evidence to will it representational and coherent. To say that “family is a fictive construct,” and in turn the nation, does not intend to take away from its palpably affective measures, but rather fictiveness is about presenting the nurturing possibilities as much as it is about being mindful

of its limitations as a form of belonging. To not contend with the fictive, the ghosts, or the absences means to disavow the more magical and creative dimensions of imagining possibilities of other types of families, intersectional subjectivities, unnatural forms of belonging, and fantastical memories that point to the instabilities of conformity, identity, history, and representation.

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<sup>1</sup> In the last ten years or so, American filmmakers, writers, artists, and scholars are preoccupied by the figure of the Asian female adoptee, and its place in the Asian/American imagination. For example, Korean director Park Chan-wook's "vengeance trilogy"—*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Oldboy* (2003), and *Lady Vengeance* (2005)—repeatedly relies on the figure of the adoptee in its stories. A short-lived blog on the *New York Times* called "Relative Choices" discusses how adoption has complicated the family in this new moment of cosmopolitan multiculturalism. Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1997), Anne Tyler's *Digging to America* (2006), and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture of Life* (2000) are all novels about the Asian female adoptee. The Asian female adoptee allegorizes the complex relationships between nations, homes, and families. She promises hope, reconciliation, and renewal, but also its related inverse, confusion, imperceptibility, and infertility.

<sup>2</sup> While the Asian immigrant woman is normally represented as generationally different from the Asian female adoptee, I would note how contemporary representations of Asian immigrant woman might challenge such generational perceptions. I am thinking specifically of Wayne Wang's *Princess of Nebraska* (2007) and So Yong Kim's *In Between Days* (2006) both films center young Asian immigrant women in the U.S., using age to challenge perceptions of what an immigrant looks like or means.

<sup>3</sup> *First Person Plural*, dir. Deann Borshay Liem (San Francisco: National Asian American Telecommunications Association, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 6.

<sup>5</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 235.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars such as Aihwa Ong and David Palumbo-Liu, argue that the representation of the Asian American as the model minority has been especially detrimental to refugee communities, which pathologizes them for not following the same assimilative trajectory as professional Asian Americans. In other words, the figure of the model minority is intimately tied to the immigrant narrative, and operates to transform the "immigrant" as an abstract subject of economic and cultural standing. See Palumbo-Liu, "War, the Homeland, and the Traces of Memory," *Asian/American*, 217–255; Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37.5, (Dec 1996): 737–762.

<sup>7</sup> Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 235.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "A Note on Dialectic," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1982), 444.

<sup>9</sup> Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 237.

<sup>10</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> See Sau-ling Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at Theoretical Crossroads," in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, ed. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 122–148; Linyan Yang, "Theorizing Asian America: On Asian American and Postcolonial Asian Diasporic Women Intellectuals," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5.2 (2003): 139–178; Eng, "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," in *Racial Castration*.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick McDermott. "Disappeared Children and the Adoptee as Immigrants," in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, ed. Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin (Boston: South End Press, 2006), 105.

<sup>13</sup> Ji-Yeon Yuh, "Moved by War: Migration, Diaspora and the Korean War," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8.3 (Oct 2005): 278.

<sup>14</sup> David Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," *Social Text* 21.3 (Fall 2003): 1.

<sup>15</sup> Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," 11.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Ceniza Choy and Gregory Paul Choy, “Transformative Terrains: Korean Adoptees and the Social Constructions of an American Childhood,” in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Carol J. Singley (Piscataway: Rutgers, The State University Press, 2003), 267.

<sup>17</sup> Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” 12.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, Ruth H. Lindenberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 116.

<sup>19</sup> I elaborate upon this on my chapter on Eric Liu, and his description of his parents.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Lee, *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> An advertisement with the headline “Charged with being ethnic Chinese” ran on page A19 in the Op-Ed section of *The New York Times* on August 7, 2000. The advertisement purchased by Chinese for Affirmative Action included lengthy copy about the false charges and prominently displayed a photo of Wen Ho Lee with his wife and two children with the caption, “Dr. Lee has been separated from his family for eight months.” Also see Wen Ho Lee, *My Country Versus Me: The First-Hand Account by the Los Alamos Scientist Who Was Falsely Accused of Being a Spy*, with Helen Zia (New York: Hyperion, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> For example, Sucheng Chan writes, “The Chinese, the first to arrive, were pushed out by powerful forces at home as well as attracted by the discovery of gold in California, the forces at home as well as attracted by the discovery of gold in California, the Pacific Northwest, and British Columbia and by jobs that became available as the American West developed. Opponents of Chinese immigration charged that those who came to North America were part of the coolie trade that brought indentured laborers.... But in fact, most of the men who came to North America bought their tickets on credit and were not contract laborers per se. Once they repaid their debts from the wages they earned, they were free to do as they pleased” (3). Chan’s reading of Chinese immigration into the U.S. portrays its dispute around the meaning of labor and its relationship to gender and freedom, but as she contends these men were not indentured servants, but were *free* (“once they repaid their debts”). Chan’s representation of these laborers as *free* attempts to convey their exceptional entrée into “America” that already cohered with the very tenets of American democracy. In *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991). Other examples include: Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Back Bay, 1998); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). I want to stress how the Asian immigrant, labor, and constructions of its gender normativity are mutually constitutive in validating Asian American subjectivity as American.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Kennedy, remarks at The National Day of Action for Immigrant Justice Rally, April 10, 2006, CQ Transcripts, LexisNexis.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “After Immigration Protests, Goal is Still Illusive,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2006, ProQuest.

<sup>26</sup> Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 126.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Shimakawa writes, “Read as abject, Asian Americanness thus occupies a role both necessary to mutually constitutive of national subject formation—but it does not result in the formation of an Asian American subject or even an Asian American object. The abject, it is important to note, does not achieve a (stable) status of object—the term often used to describe the position of (racially or sexually) disenfranchised groups in analyses of the politics of representation. For what characterizes Asian Americanness as it comes into visibility... is its constantly shifting relation to Americanness, a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation; it is that *movement between* enacted by and on Asian Americans, I argue that marks the boundaries of Asian American cultural (and sometimes) legal citizenship. For U.S. Americanness to maintain its symbolic coherence, the national abject continually must be both made and present” (3) in *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> As noted in my analysis of Eric Liu’s memoir, he describes his father through the metaphor of a butterfly.

<sup>29</sup> David Eng writes, “From the perspective of Asian American studies and history, we might consider how transnational adoption from Asia fits not only within a gendered postwar pattern of privileged immigration (war brides, mail-order brides, transnational adoptees) but also within nineteenth-century histories of anti-Asian immigration and bars to naturalization and citizenship. The period from 1882 to 1943 is often cited as the ‘official’ years of Asian exclusion. However, legal scholar Leti Volpp has suggested that the Page Law of 1875, largely banning Chinese female immigration to the United States, might be a more appropriate historical date to mark the *gendered* form in which racialized exclusion of Asian immigrants from the U.S. nation-state took place. In this regard, the privileged migration of Chinese baby girls in our contemporary moment marks not only a striking gendered reversal of this history of racialized exclusion but also an

emergent form of Asian American subjectivity of considerable consequence to Asian American politics, history, and community” (10–11). Likewise, we observe how each of these feminine figures contributes to the possibilities of heteronormative and homonormative familial imaginations. In “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas.”

<sup>30</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 162.

<sup>31</sup> Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 69.

<sup>32</sup> Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1921), 736-7, quoted in David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 297.

<sup>33</sup> Rona Marech, “Berkeley Filmmaker Unearths a Past She Left in Korea,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, December 15 2000, Lexis-Nexis.

<sup>34</sup> Eng, *Racial Castration*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Eleana Kim, “Korean Adoptee Auto-Ethnography: Refashioning Self, Family and Finding Community,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 16.1 (spring-summer 2000): 50.

<sup>36</sup> Lee, *Orientalism*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> The image of Korean children being adopted by American families was popularized by Harry Holt, who in 1955 traveled to Korea to adopt eight mixed-race children after being inspired by a Christian newsreel program on the plight of children orphaned and displaced by the Korean War. Holt, a successful farmer from Oregon, was dissatisfied with the long bureaucratic process of social work agencies and state welfare organizations. Holt’s adoption made headlines in the United States, and he gained recognition as a generous humanitarian. Holt inspired other people to adopt and developed an adoption program that would bypass U.S. social welfare institutions that had reservations approving him and his wife Bertha as adoptive parents. Holt, according to records found in the International Social Service archives, was too much of religious zealot and his ten children were improperly educated, far from the suburban, middle-class ideal required to raise proper children in the Cold War moment. Instead Holt’s adoption process would rely on the gumption of good American Christians, whom despite class or educational background, could open their homes to raise Korean orphans as good Christians.

The unconditional love of Christianity coincided with the middle-class idealism and American individualism to reform the adoptee from destitute “helpless by-product of war” to an abstract individual. In an article published on December 4, 1955 in *The New York Times* we see how the Holts’ newly adopted eight Korean orphans are transformed:

Of course, their English is almost non-existent, but universal things like love they understand most well. They beg to be picked up. They hunger for affection and the Holts supply it magnificently. They sleep in individual cribs in a large nursery. Each has his own rack for his coat rubbers, and hat. Each carries his empty plate to the kitchen after meals. Vitamin concentrate is administered on an assembly-line plan. Each has his highchair and is treated by the Holts as an individual.

Their histories no longer relevant, the children are reformed as individuals. Transracial, international adoption in the contemporary moment shares a similar approach, but now, racial difference within the home is symbolic of a cosmopolitan, multicultural moment where race can be embrace as a marker of individualism. While the premise of adoption in the Cold War era speaks to America’s cultural power and its ability to produce proper subjects under its cultural power, adoptive parents these days are much more likely to see themselves as enlightened subjects of the post-Civil Rights moment, who unlike the parents of Korean adoptees during the 50s to the 80s, look towards raising their children as bicultural subjects of America and China/Korea. In “8 Korean Orphans in Oregon Family,” *New York Times*, December 4 1955, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>38</sup> SooJin Pate’s dissertation on representations of the “orphan” explores how the Korean orphan during the Korean War and its recovery elicited particular notions of what it meant to be orphan and how international aid organizations along with the U.S. military shaped such representations as distinct from the adoptee. See SooJin Pate, “Genealogies of Korean Adoption: American Empire, Militarization, and Yellow Desire” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, May 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 68.

<sup>40</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> For insightful analysis on the Chicago School, please refer to Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*; Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 297.

<sup>44</sup> Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American*, 89.

<sup>45</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 60.

<sup>46</sup> Eleana Kim, "Korean Adoptee Auto-Ethnography": 50.

<sup>47</sup> Stuart Hall, "Minimal Selves," 114.

<sup>48</sup> Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 146.

<sup>49</sup> In his reading, Eng sees this "attempt to merge her two mothers" as "illustrat[ing] the difficulty of [Borshay Liem's] psychic dilemma of the maternal and the racial" (26). In Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas."

<sup>50</sup> I borrow this phrase from Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*.

<sup>51</sup> The identification of adoptees has historically presented problems as many documents are falsified and reconstructed to portray new identities.

<sup>52</sup> Peter X. Feng explains, "If the video at first hints that Borshay's U.S. identity is a construction and her 'true' identity is Korean, her Korean identity is shown to be equally a construction, an uneasy hybrid of Cha and Kang. Her trip to Korea results in a renewed intimacy with her adoptive mother; rather than narrating a return to an essential Korean identity, the video instead charts the dynamic equilibrium of the videomaker's investments in the Kang and Borshay families (haunted by the specter of her identity as Cha)" (211). In Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Richard Dyer writes, "[I]t has been customary in the West to call the complexion of Chinese or Japanese people yellow, yet it is by no means clear that their complexions are so distinct from that of white Westerners; it is generally the shape of the eyes that is critical in deciding whether someone is 'white' or 'yellow'" (42). In Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," 26.

<sup>55</sup> Marech, "Berkeley Filmmaker Unearths a Past She Left in Korea."

<sup>56</sup> Deann's biological mother sees the antidote to Deann's melancholia as marriage and the formation of her own family.

<sup>57</sup> Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," 33.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>60</sup> While documentary films and memoirs seem to be the most widely distributed and seen works by Korean adoptee artists, experimental filmmakers and visual artists such as Me-K Ahn and Jane Jin Kaisen among many others provide compelling and avant-garde imaginings.

<sup>61</sup> Kim, "Korean Adoptee Auto-Ethnography," 61.

<sup>62</sup> Toby Alice Volkman, "Introduction: Transnational Adoption," *Social Text* 74 21.1 (spring 2003): 2–3.

## EPILOGUE

“I’m always doing an Asian woman.”

– Patty Chang<sup>1</sup>

I’d like to conclude this project by thinking through two final questions: How does the figure of the immigrant allow for readings of Asian American culture as unrepresentational? And how might the unrepresentational challenge a politics of visibility oriented around recognition and legitimacy?

These are questions I addressed in my project by drawing out the terms of visibility for the Asian immigrant in Asian American cultural practices. The first question seems paradoxical. For one, the Asian immigrant stands as an imminently legible figure. She historically legitimates the place of Asians in the U.S. in America. She is persistently discerned to be reproduced, reproducible, and reproductive of competing political, cultural, and economic agendas of, to name a few, American liberalisms, Asian American activisms, and transnational capitalisms. This is why I gendered the immigrant as a feminine figure in my dissertation. My choice to do so was to trace out how anxieties of the fictive are drawn around the Asian immigrant as reproductive of the cultures of the nation-state and capital (i.e. the American dream and its commodities) as well as racial and ethnic origins, truths, and culture. As demonstrated, this reproduction of identity and culture is a feminizing trait and one that conditions anxieties of the fictive in Asian American cultural practices and its producers.

But the Asian immigrant as a liminal figure stands in excess to subjections of visibility. She intervenes in recognitions as Americans, Asian Americans, and artists to position these subjectivities as impossible determinations. There are detrimental effects when one is unrecognized by the nation-state and its cultures, but identity as such is not redemptive. In



speaking of the immigrant as an analytical figure and a cultural character, I don't mean to erase the complex terms in which she exists. Instead, I do so to imagine new relationships with the Asian immigrant in our daily lives. I find this especially necessary as I observe a continuing divide between my Asian American, ethnic immigrant, and Asian international students, and the competing logics in which they define their identity. The rehearsed failures of legitimacy and recognition cannot be remedied through narratives of assimilation as a native speaker, belonging as a Korean American woman, historical amnesia for the adoptee, or in erasure of the immigrant to become normal. These narratives exceed the normative terms of belonging and identity, and demonstrate the impossibility of subjectivity for Asians in the U.S. As such, the immigrant is not a minimal or economical figure within American master narratives and Asian American cultural production because she does not only produce what is expected of her, and is always in danger of transgressing her role. Thus, the failures of recognition are not oriented around insufficiency<sup>2</sup>, but rather excess and abstraction.

It is under this premise that I see anxieties of the fictive as a necessary concept in approaching how we read Asian American culture and its representational politics. Anxiety can be a productive affect: it is questioning, self-reflexive, anticipatory, vulnerable, and excessive. I observe these excesses throughout my dissertation: Eric Liu's racial somatic challenges his claims to national identity underwritten by his articulations of English and its acoustic individualism; Ahn Joo's subjectivity as a "Korean-American woman" exceeds the limned terms available by the authorizing narratives of belonging produced by the nation and diaspora; in Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow*, the Asian immigrant stands in the shadows of heteromasculinities to critique discourses of equality produced by the state and markets; and reconceiving the Asian immigrant as Korean adoptee disrupts the naturalizing tendencies of family and nation to think of immigrant labors as generative of new formations of belonging and identity. Rather than reading these excesses as failures of identity or America and its legal

and cultural apparatuses, I argue that the impossibility of subjectivity points to a politics to conceive of Asians in the U.S. as unrepresentational. Unrepresentational does not mean nonrepresentational, but rather unrepresentational refers to an interrogation of the predictable confines of what is made visible. This is why I turn towards examples such as Eric Liu's *Accidental Asian* and PBS documentaries, to argue that these projects do not give us prescriptive and reconciliatory notions of what is Asian American, American, and an immigrant, but continuously transgresses their descriptive, categorical, and narrative conclusions.

The concept of unrepresentational also suggests that Asian American artists produce works that are illustrative of their subject formations, but not necessarily representative of their identities. Patty Chang's *Shaved (At a Loss)*<sup>3</sup> (1998) exemplifies this conceit in compelling ways. Chang is a performance artist that depends on her body as her medium to disassemble and reconstitute the confines of her subjectivity. As she states, "I am always *doing* Asian woman" (my emphasis). At the same time, it is her *doing* Asian woman that she continuously transgresses the somatic terms of her body. In the performance, Chang pokes her way on screen with the guidance of a walking stick. She is blindfolded, and costumed as a Victorian courtesan in a long blue skirt and corseted top with cleavage spilling. She makes her way to the chair at the center of the screen, and opens her suitcase filling a water glass with Perrier, then pulls out a razor blade, rolls up her skirts to expose her sex, and begins unceremoniously shaving her pubic area—blindfold in tact. Viewing the performance elicits feelings of anxiety and discomfort, anxiety about her injuring the most private and intimate part of her body and discomfort at its unadulterated disclosure both in its reveal and through the act of shaving. For me, the text portrays how the exposure of her body does not necessarily offer confirmations of her gender and especially her sexuality, but rather in some ways, those meanings are abstracted through the mechanical act of shaving. In noting the centrality of her body in her work, Chang notes, "A body with integrity is hard to find. Perhaps I am trying to take my damaged, divided, and

immoral body, and making it as whole as possible.”<sup>4</sup> Chang points to the terms of *making* a racial, gender, and sexual body as always partial and impossible. Chang portrays how for Asian American cultural producers taking up space, always means that their differences constitute that space. Rather than perceiving this as something to transcend, Asian American differences both in culture and as cultural producers engage productive and necessary interventions to discourses of normativity.

To think through the second question: how might the unrepresentational challenge a politics of visibility oriented around recognition and legitimacy? I turn to Susan Choi’s novel *American Woman*<sup>5</sup> as an object lesson to examine the limits of cultural politics when they are invested in apertures of visibility often authorized by institutions. The novel written in 2003 takes place during the 1970s reflecting upon the mood of amplified cynicism that felled radical activism in the new decade. The story does not fabricate nostalgia for this era. Rather it takes up the declining idealism to gesture towards new political frameworks for social justice, making it a seemingly appropriate example for this project and its endless fascination with a bygone era of political activism. The fictional narrative takes place following Patty Hearst’s kidnapping by the Symbionese Liberation Army, focusing on Hearst’s companion, Wendy Yoshimura renamed Jenny Shimada. In Choi’s novel, Jenny appears to us as a young fugitive on the lam in upstate New York for fashioning and planting bombs in the Bay Area to stage protest against the Vietnam War. While in hiding, she is contacted by an old comrade, Frazer, to act as a guardian to the remaining three members of an incendiary group who have died in a fiery shootout with the police. Juan, Yvonne, and Pauline, the infamous society debutant, are promised safety in exchange for writing a book detailing their group’s experiences and philosophies. Frazer, who has left activism for the academy, expects to capitalize upon the public’s immense curiosity about Pauline and her relationship to radicalism. But the three see the book project as impotent compared to recording shocking manifestos, and planning banks

robberies for the purpose of “revolution.” The three vainly look for themselves in the media, reading newspapers, clipping articles, and vigilantly sitting by the radio to hear their names and voices. But it becomes apparent that it’s Pauline that the public wants—her voice, her image, and her pedigree—the sensational combination of those things makes her a desirable curiosity. Jenny is frustrated with the group’s politics and their flawed investments in the visible.

While in town away from their sequestered farm house, Jenny converses with a friendly young black boy, who prompts her to reflect upon her own origins of political consciousness, Jenny’s memory focuses upon one particular image:

In Vietnam at the start of that summer a monk had immolated himself, and the ghastly flames eating his body had been shown on TV. Now her father was declaring a truce in his one-sided war on the land of his birth, but it was at the same moment she’d started to grasp why he’d waged it. It had been at her school in Japan that she’d learned about the internment. She’d never heard of it in California, where it had happened, or from her father, to whom it had happened, and when she’d asked him about it after school that day he’d just said with annoyance, ‘Why ask about that? All of that was a long time ago.’

But to her it had seemed like a key: to understanding him, to knowing him, perhaps even to being his daughter. Her discovery of history and politics, of power and oppression, of brotherhood and racism, and finally, of radicalism; but it only drove them to fight with each other.” (162–3)

For Jenny, witnessing the Buddhist monk Thích Quan Đức setting himself on fire in protest of the Diem regime coalesces with lessons on Japanese internment, and her father, a Japanese internee and No-No Boy, who repatriated to Japan with Jenny, only to bring them back to California five years later. Comparatively to this iconic image, her father’s internment and repatriation have no graphic symbol for its resistance. For Jenny, the desire to render the diffuse, mundane, and extraordinary power of the nation present through her bombs seems linked to the invisibility of her father’s resistance—as she says to make people “see.” Yet Jenny’s “radicalism” and desire to “bring the war back home” only complicates her relationship with Jim Shimada, her father, as he tries to snuff her political fire and condescends her politics, shouting “What do you know?”

If Jenny relied on bombs to make her politics known—as a way to interpellate the public into her own beliefs—towards the end of the novel we see how she realizes that the mediums of visibility used to challenge state-issued violence and corporate capitalism are more complicit with its logics rather than revolutionary. Following a failed robbery and the murder of a grocery store manager, Jenny and Pauline flee from New York leaving behind Juan and Yvonne. The two live a seemingly happy existence undercover in San Francisco now having identified the patriarchy of radicalism towards a feminist politics. This life comes to an end when they are finally apprehended by the FBI, and Pauline betrays Jenny by naming her as an accessory in the murder. In response to the heartbreaking news of Pauline's betrayal, Jenny revisits a familiar image:

She thought of the monk she had seen years ago on the news, immolating himself. It was a sight that had shocked and transformed her perhaps more than anything else in her life. She supposed now...it had been that unparalleled shock of the real she had wanted to force onto others, the way she'd felt it forced onto herself, by the monk in his column of flame. She had wanted to force others to see, no matter what it might take, and had felt this was just what the monk had been doing. But perhaps she'd been wrong, and the monk had really meant to convey the horrifying idea that had first crossed her mind seeing him, and that afterwards she'd so urgently tried to refute: that a passion for rightness was never enough, that one's every attempt would be futile. That in the end the only way to protest was by simply removing oneself from the world. (351)

Initially, Jenny sees the monk as a sheer and lurid impregnable truth, but the self-immolation now registers as an act of absence and invisibility. Jenny realizes that visibility does not battle the structures of power nor does it endow us with agency. Rather, in some ways, it trains us to affirm the authority of governments, institutions, and its cultures, and in turn, impinges us under its politics of visibility bent on recognition and legitimacy.

At the novel's end, Jenny is freed from prison for good behavior, and she and her father visit Manzanar for a reunion. On their drive towards the mountains, Jim is in a recalcitrant yet anticipatory mood about returning to the place where he was interned during World War II. When they arrive to the site, Jim remarks that things look the same, but tells

Jenny not to ask him to remember anything. They marvel the hills that surround the landscape. Jim tells Jenny, “That’s what’s so amazing. They’re only a few hundred feet at most. [...] But when you climb one of them, it’s just like you’re up on a mountain. Why?” Jenny states, “Visibility.” “Exactly. It goes on forever,” (368) Jim responds. This concluding scene between daughter and father seems to connote that visibility does not provide exposure, but rather is perceptive and deceptive depending on where you stand. Especially, here at Manzanar where Japanese in the U.S., most of them citizens, were contained to manage national anxieties of their visibility in the public by subjecting them to surveillance. Their exchange points to how the state sanctions the conditions of visibility to offer recognitions and politics as Americans, but also radicals.

In a strange coincidence to the end of *A Cab Called Reliable*, Jim reminds Jenny: “Hey...I *lived* here.” To which she responds, “I know.” If Jenny’s politics were precipitated by Thích Quan Đức’s violent image of resistance and her father’s illegible resistances, we observe how her father’s challenge to the authorities of the state while unrecognized and unseen by public are indexed here at Manzanar (“I *lived* here.”) and also spaces elsewhere. Compared to the young renegades who hunger to see their names and acts validated by the public, here, we see Jenny’s father enact a different model, one that bears no recognitions and are not greeted with heroics. Like the knowledges Ahn Joo ascertains from her father, we observe how Jenny’s desire to know about what happened to her father during World War II, to expose its truths, can never legitimate her politics nor his. Moreover, it does not make her understand him more, know him as she suggests, or make her “his daughter.” Jenny comes to realize that political logics of liberation and revolution are increasingly complicated especially as she realizes the battle lines are complex intersections of U.S. militarism, transnational capital, and the institutions of the state. (Her father’s failed repatriation is also an example of the complex paradoxes when we enter fight power as a binary opposition.) Jenny’s retreat from

radical politics after her release from prison appears to suggest her apathy, but as Choi writes in an earlier scene, “More and more she thought of revolution not as mustered force that might topple The System, but as a delicate process of changing individual minds, or as the rare chance to try” (296). The novel illustrates various different formations of possibility: the feminist group that Jenny and Pauline forge when they enter, the pan-ethnic group of Asian Americans that support her during the trial, and her and her father at Manzanar. None of these are perfect, but they provide moments of, albeit sometimes, brief and continuous possibility.

If modes of visibility have been central to Asian American cultural politics, how does the novel reconceive our relationship to visibility? I see Choi’s novel as theorizing two related possibilities: the first is laid out in Jenny’s reflections on the relationship between visibility and systems of domination as mutually constitutive. In other words, films like *Better Luck Tomorrow* and *Harold and Kumar* are important and pleasurable, but at the same time, they register culture in terms of its impact of visibility, but as Jenny realizes such measures only submit to existing structures of resistance and engagement. The second is Jenny’s father and his opposition to the U.S. government and what I note at the end, that we are always capable of developing resistances and producing cultures that aggrESS the normative imaginations of personhood. Moreover, we observe these are ongoing practices that produce epistemologies that are inscrutable to the glares of the mainstream. Normative articulations of visibility cannot measure these cultural politics. These two examples, leads me to my final point: visibilities are heterogeneous, and that there are many spheres to practice and discover representations that are not authorized by what seem like valid spaces to find art, culture, and politics.

This is a sentiment that Renee Tajima and Quynh Thai cite in their November 1987 study for the Media Action Project initiated by Film News Foundation and Third World Newsreel. The study was designed to examine how to better support the role of non-white producers from many different fields: film, video, audio, etc. In their research of over 300

producers from New York, Tajima and Thai made a surprising discovery: “Contrary to our initial premise that the numbers were scarce, MAP was surprised to discover more producers than we anticipated,”<sup>6</sup> but more importantly they found a “widely diverse” set of people working in various fields: an Ethiopian-born cable producer, who creates local programming, a Taiwanese immigrant and experimental videographer who worked with Paper Tiger, and a black radio producer with his own weekly music show. They emphasized that their own biases in independent film and video had limited where to look for nonwhite producers, but revising their assumptions lead them to find a heterogeneity of cultural practices. Significant to their conclusions is that innovative and exciting cultural representations and practices of nonwhites are all around us. It’s not that they don’t exist, it’s that we haven’t found them. Looking for culture seems tiring in an age that it is literally hand delivered to us, but as I tell my students transgressive and “real” images of Asian Americans exist everywhere, just don’t look for it in Hollywood or television.

When I was working at the Asian American film festival in New York, the most difficult challenges presided in innovating its crumbling institutional structure. Suggestions to reduce the size, move to smaller and nontraditional venues, show independent films, engage unexpected audiences surrendered to the financial demands of corporate sponsorship, foundational support, and appealing to a demographic. Instead of encouraging new artists and inventive narratives, we often relegated to showing Asian blockbusters, which during the 1980s meant something, but by the 1990s became a tactic to retain diminishing audiences. At the same time, in spite of these institutional pressures, there was also a profound sense of community felt at events that oriented around the festival produced around watching and seeing films. Likewise, we did show transformative and transgressive films—it just felt like a challenge to do so. When I left the organization I felt a bit jaded and skeptical, but in retrospect, the lessons I did learn is how we measure the terms of visibility requires rethinking.



The prevailing equation is that greater visibility equals greater change. In thinking about these challenges, like many of us who think, teach, write, and practice culture, I realized like Jenny that while greater change is necessary, there are an infinite spaces to enact change. For me, culture is essential in providing structure for these types of possibility. I found them at film festivals, punk rock shows, literature, zines, in art, and now on the internet. It is under this premise that I also sought out to get my undergraduate degree in ethnic studies and a graduate degree in American studies. Institutions such as the Asian American film festival and academia are limited, but they are also apparatuses that provide change. Through academia I found language that provided nuance to what seemed like monolithic structures of power. These are certainly intellectual ideas that are generated out of privileged professions, but they also perceive the everyday in ways that are instrumental. It might not seem immediate, but it does have effects.

This project is an exercise to use scholarship to articulate Asian American cultures as political and affective means to intervene upon the normative. Its incitements of anxieties ushers the possibilities of the fictive in my imaginations of Asian America.

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<sup>1</sup> “Interview with Patty Chang,” interview by Eve Oishi, *Camera Obscura* 54.3 (2003): 127.

<sup>2</sup> While we can read the racial castration of Asian American masculinity as an excision to manhood, we can also read Asian American masculinity as feminizing and thus surplus.

<sup>3</sup> Patty Chang, *Shaved (At a Loss)*, video, 1998, 5:25 mins

<sup>4</sup> Patty Chang, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Choi, *American Woman* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Renee Tajima and Quynh Thai, “Media Action Project Preliminary Findings and Recommendations,” November 1987.

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