

UNREADING MULTILINGUALISMS OF THE KOREAN DIASPORA

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Abstract

This project critiques the impulse to read literature and culture of the Korean diaspora as representative of individual(s), culture(s), or community(ies), and the long-standing focus on what difference looks like. Each of my primary texts has been written or performed by Korean diasporic women in the past three decades. My primary materials also include both Korean and English, and most include a third or even a fourth language. While still attending to visual reading practices, my project privileges the *sound* of difference. I attend to how these different sounds are represented on the printed page, the cinematic screen, and the theatre stage. Each of these genres and media allows multilinguality to be expressed in different and very specific ways.

My methodology consists of “unreading” contemporary texts. By unreading, I mean the practice of disrupting and deconstructing more dominant languages, vocabularies, and reading practices, guided by Rey Chow’s discussion of “unlearning” and Kandice Chuh’s work on deconstructing the “Asian American subject.” With this approach, I investigate how relations of power are represented in cultural productions. I begin with a discussion of the modernization and democratization of the Korean language, particularly during the period of Japanese colonization. It is within this context that I read the historical traces that emerge in the language(s) of contemporary works. I then consider the grammatical, social, political, and cultural implications of eliciting a specific Western-derived first-person singular subject from a more (potentially deliberately) ambiguous Korean context. In the second half of this project, I turn to the media of film and television to argue that historical traces of the phenomena of early cinema, particularly during Korea’s colonial period, inform the translation and communication technologies featured in contemporary films of the Korean diaspora. The layering of subtitling in *noraebang* scenes enacts a doubling of both screens and subtitles, introducing rich layers of textuality while recalling the titles of early cinema. I conclude by considering the specific contributions of this project to the field of Asian American studies.

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Introduction: The Sound of Difference

The ten vowels in the Korean alphabet are commonly learned as five pairs of vowels, with each pair sharing a similar sound: ah yah / uh yuh / oh yoh / ooh yoo / eu ee (ㅏ ㅑ / ㅓ ㅕ / ㅗ ㅛ / ㅜ ㅠ / ㅡ ㅣ). Thus, the position of the mouth, lips, and tongue stay in nearly the same position for each of the vowel pairs when they are sounded aloud. Additionally, the pairings of the printed characters also share a visual resemblance. When all of the vowels are sounded out in succession, the series of vowels constitute a soft rhythmic staccato. The mouth is opened at its widest with the first vowel and the mouth closes a bit more with each succeeding vowel until by the last vowel, the lips are almost completely closed.

In her short film, “Mouth to Mouth” (1975), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha focuses on the positions of a mouth forming Korean vowel sounds. The film opens with a slow pan over the written text “mouth to mouth.” An abstract succession of black and white images, resembling the surface of water disturbed by rain, is intercut with a close-up of a mouth slowly opening and closing in the center of the screen. The lips mouth Korean vowels in combinations of two or more in a row before being drowned out by the image of water. The film’s soundtrack consists entirely of the white noise of soft static overlapping with the sound of rain falling into water. At no point is the pronunciation of the vowels actually heard. Rather, the sounds of static and rain are set against extreme close-ups of lips mouthing these Korean vowels.

The majority of these vowels are organized alphabetically but the third and sixth characters disrupt the order: “ㅏ ㅑ ㅓ ㅕ ㅗ ㅛ ㅜ ㅠ ㅡ ㅣ.” The selected and reorganized eight vowels in the film are presented in the following sequence: first, second, *seventh*, third,

fourth, *ninth*, fifth, sixth. While these vowels seem out of sequence, they still create a rhythmic series of sounds that both rely on and play with alphabetical order. Each of the five pairs is represented in this jumbled sequence, as the seventh vowel (ㅏ; oo) suggests the absent eighth (ㅑ; yoo) and the ninth vowel (ㅡ; eu) suggests the absent tenth (ㅣ; ee). The presentation of six of the vowels in their familiar pairings evokes a rhyming and rhythmic pattern to this series. The isolated emphasis of the visualization of language—in the form of printed text and in the body’s performance of speech—focuses on language as it is printed or spoken, rather than read or heard. In other words, the film shifts attention away from the audience’s *reception*—which is often the focus of readings of texts and particularly of translations—to the *production* and performance of language.

The beginning and end of the “Urania/Astronomy” section of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* further supports her interest in language and embodiment. This section opens with a chart depicting the outlines of two human figures with Chinese characters above and around the two bodies (63). The Chinese text, the bodies’ outlines, and the various highlighted points on the bodies—all printed in white against a black background—evoke the night sky, underscoring the connection between astrology and medicine in East Asian tradition. This negative image also recalls the process of developing a photograph, which reinforces the text’s persistent interest in representation—of physical bodies, of language in written form, and the sound of language. Further, this allusion to photography, and its negative image, seems to favor the ambiguity of its not-quite-developed state over the presumed linearity of a predetermined procession.

The “Urania/Astronomy” section ends with another set of charts depicting the human mouth and throat (74). The Chinese characters on the first set of diagrams contrasts sharply against the recognizable English terms for the various body parts shown in the second set of diagrams. These charts emphasize Cha’s interest in the often overlooked role of the body in the articulation of language, and particularly in the work of translation, between languages and cultures. But rather than simply illuminating the body, image and word in her work—highlighted as culturally specific, material objects—*Dictee* calls attention to the body as a stubbornly unreadable text.

The diagrams of the mouth and throat recall the process by which hangeul, the Korean written language, was first invented in 1446. The print characters were designed to mimic the position of the mouth, throat, and tongue when the sounds they indicate are spoken aloud. Even today, charts of the Korean alphabet often include diagrams of the mouth and throat to instruct students on proper pronunciation. While this reference is not made explicit in *Dictee*, it would be surprising if Cha had been unaware of this, especially since she had spent most of her elementary school years in South Korea.

What is so fascinating and useful about these two examples of her work is the way she encourages us to move beyond thinking about the (Asian American) body and voice as a collective or representative one for a larger community by focusing on the physicality of single individual bodies and on specific body parts. I enclose “Asian American” in parentheses because there is nothing to indicate the racial composition of any of the bodies presented in these two above examples.

For instance, “Mouth to Mouth” crops out the traditional visual markers of racial difference and focuses attention on the movements of the mouth in articulating Korean

vowels—movements that would be unfamiliar to non-Korean speakers. Thus, the marker of difference is in the *performance* of the racially indistinguishable mouth of the speaker. The abstractions of these bodies—in the extreme close-up of “Mouth to Mouth” and the clinical detachment of the charts in “Urania/Astronomy”— encourages audiences to dispel the expectations for Asian American literature and art to function solely as representation.

The impulse to read literature and culture of the Korean diaspora as representative—of individual(s), culture(s), or community(ies)—is rooted in the long-standing concern with understanding difference through visual cues and visual metaphors, particularly in American literature and culture. This impulse is rooted in the long-standing concern with what difference *looks* like, particularly in American popular culture. This is evident in the prosthetics, cosmetics, and dress that had been employed by white actors playing Asian characters in Hollywood films, as well as in guides that had been circulated in popular American publications to distinguish between Chinese and Japanese people at various moments of international conflict.¹ There have been other instances in which attention to visual differences were portrayed in more flattering lights. In these varying ways, presumptions of cultural difference were persistently *visualized*, in one’s complexion, facial features, dress, posture, and mannerisms. In this context, Asian American literature was—and still is—read as textual representations of visual difference (as evidence of or extensions of cultural difference). In Kandice Chuh’s words, in such instances, Asian American literature is understood as “seemingly transparent vehicles of

¹ See Josephine Lee’s *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*, Robert G. Lee’s *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, Gina Marchetti’s *Romance and the “Yellow Peril: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, and Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham’s *Asian Americans and the Media* for in-depth studies on such practices.

authentic otherness” (*Imagine Otherwise* 19). This puts a tremendous amount of pressure for these works to do more than they had ever professed to do.

My project intervenes in this familiar approach to understanding difference in visual terms to, instead, focus on the aural. In thinking through the sound of difference and how this sound is produced, I examine multilingual texts and performances of the Korean diaspora, variations from standard American English and Korean, and translation technologies. I consider how the sounds of difference are represented differently on the printed page, film and television screens, and on the theater stage. I further examine how relations of power are represented in cultural production, through the use of language.

Rey Chow offers an insightful commentary on the too-often presumed neutrality of languages:

Because language as such tends to be viewed as a neutral fact, seldom is it pointed out in discussions of comparative literature that languages and cultures rarely enter the world stage and encounter one another on an equal footing, that “languages embed relations of dominance,” and that the notion of parity embedded in comparison as it currently stands would need to be recognized perhaps as a form of utopianism that tends to run aground in practice. (“The Old/New Question” 296)

Chow argues for the importance in considering the uneven terrain of languages in a comparatist environment. The French in *Dictee*, the Spanish in *The Temperature of This Water*, the Korean in *Clay Walls*, and the Chinese in “Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven” are not read as “foreign” in the same ways. In this way, I argue that words carry a history with them and further, that history is caught up in language.

In order to do so, this project engages with the history of the Korean language and film during the Korean colonial period, as well as contemporary Korean American cultural production. As I focus on the contemporary cultural production of Korean diasporic women, I read the traces of history and linguistic change in these texts, and closely attend to the *sound* of the multiple languages and accents in which they are produced. My methodology consists in “unreading” multilingual texts: disrupting and deconstructing more dominant languages, vocabularies, and reading practices in order to more closely attend to the language(s) of these works. In doing so, I theorize ways in which both popular and critical American audiences may access unfamiliar languages—such as Korean—including looking to other visual and aural aspects of the works, among other strategies. One of my principle objectives in this dissertation is to argue for multiple alternative approaches for multilingual texts beyond simply providing linguistic and cultural translations. Further, as I approach Asian American literary studies within a transnational scope, I propose an alternate set of spaces, times, and languages that may re-center and expand the field. In my research, I resituate one potential “center”—which, perhaps deceptively, is meant to suggest multiplicity—to early twentieth-century Korea.

A number of significant events—including the “opening” of the “Hermit Kingdom” at the turn of the century, the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), and the Korean War—resulted in the beginnings of the Korean diaspora to China, Manchuria, Japan, and the United States. These early diasporic movements created multilingual communities throughout Asia and North America. While framing the historical context of my research in the earlier twentieth century, my primary texts are comprised of works by Korean diasporic women produced in the past three decades. This study, then,

demonstrates the traces left by history in contemporary cultural production: textually in the changing print and punctuation of the Korean language, physically in the displaced bodies of diasporic Koreans, and aurally in the sound of multiple languages and accents of Korean diasporic characters.

I base the term “unreading,” in part, on Rey Chow’s discussion of “unlearning” and Kandice Chuh’s articulation of “becoming and undoing.” Both of these scholars consider how deconstructivist approaches may be framed within postcolonial studies, though with specific critiques and critical investments that I discuss below. In her introduction to *Writing Diaspora*, Rey Chow simultaneously engages with and is critical of Freudian and Lacanian approaches to reading Chineseness as a cultural signifier, as “*a myth that demands absolute submission because it is empty*” (24). She posits that her project requires an “unlearning” before she can even begin the work she sets out to do. “Part of the goal of ‘writing diaspora’ is, thus, to *unlearn* that submission to one’s ethnicity such as ‘Chineseness’ as the ultimate signified even as one continues to support movements for democracy and human rights in China, Hong Kong, and elsewhere” (25). Chow pays particular attention to language, literacy, and writing, which I note in detail, in subsequent chapters of this project.

Kandice Chuh also presents an intervention in recent developments within diaspora studies. Unlike Rey Chow, Kandice Chuh engages first with the field of Asian American studies, before expanding transnationally. As she discusses in her introduction, each of the words that comprise the term “Asian American subject” has been contested, particularly in the impossibility of this singular composite noun to serve as a referent for the heterogeneity of people of Asian descent living in America. While critical of the

often-Eurocentric preconceptions that inform poststructuralism, Chuh considers how a poststructuralist approach may be useful in reconsidering this term. “‘Asian American,’ because it is a term *in difference from itself*—at once making a claim of achieved subjectivity and referring to the impossibility of that achievement—deconstructs itself, is itself deconstruction. ... [D]econstruction is a state of becoming and undoing in the same moment” (*Imagine Otherwise* 8). In this way, Chuh presents a critique of the presumption of homogeneity of Asian American communities by shifting the critical focus from the “Asian American subject”—an impossible term—to the construction and subsequent *deconstruction* of the subject itself.

Rey Chow’s “unlearning” and Kandice Chuh’s “undoing” informs my “unreading” approach. My strategy focuses on multilinguality to investigate how relations of power are represented in cultural productions of the Korean diaspora. As different genres and media emphasize distinct aspects of multilinguality, my selected texts include works of fiction, poetry, drama, television, and film. These examples of literature and performance highlight the varying sounds of language, physical differences in printed language, and tensions that emerge across translation. My investigation of poetry and prose engages with the visual representation of language on the printed page. Korean and other non-English languages are distinguished, at times, by italics, but this practice is not consistent. Punctuation also marks printed text to highlight shifts between languages. Further, the physical spacings between words and between lines of text speak to geographic, as well as cultural, difference. The performance of drama also involves the physical embodiment of some of these concerns. In reading both printed scripts as well as video recordings of live performances, I attend to the actors’ interpretations of the scripts,

while noting the audience's reception of the actors' responses to each other. The bodies and performances of these actors demonstrate ways in which the more abstract concerns associated with print literature may be realized on the stage. While I also approach my examples from television and film as performances, in my later chapters, I focus on subtitling and editing techniques, both of which distinguish these media from theater.

In my first chapter, "Between Words / Between Bodies," I investigate the languages and print cultures represented in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982), Ishle Yi Park's *The Temperature of This Water* (2006), and Ronyoung Kim's *Clay Walls* (1986). Changes in punctuation usage have been significant in the Korean language at the turn of the twentieth century. When punctuation marks first emerged in written Korean, they had been considered foreign to the native Korean language. I relate this linguistic phenomenon to the use of punctuation marks or spacing in discussions of cultural marginalization in America. For decades, Asian Americanist critics have debated the choice of a hyphen, slash, or space between the words "Asian" and "American." These concerns connect the representation of Asian Americans in print literature to the visual readings of actual Asian American bodies in American society. Further, punctuation and spacings mediate between written and spoken language, as they direct the breaths, pauses, and inflections of the text when read out loud.

I continue my examination of language and translation in my second chapter as I focus on how grammatical subjects have been translated or interpellated in works by Korean American writers, or by American critics reading these works. In printed text, and especially in speech, Korean statements are frequently constructed without an explicitly identified grammatical subject. This is especially true for the first-person singular subject,

“I.” Translations into English (and into other languages) often include a definitive grammatical subject, in which case the productive absence of the “I” in the original Korean text is erased. In this chapter, “Asian/American Subjects Absent, Abject, and in Linguistic Transit,” I consider the grammatical shifts of such translations in my readings of *Clay Walls*, *Dictée*, and Young Jean Lee’s play *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven: A Show About White People in Love* (2006). This examination then considers the social, political, and cultural implications of eliciting a particular Western-derived subject from a more (potentially deliberately) ambiguous Korean context. I consider theorizations of the subaltern, feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern subject to problematize the loss of the absent (grammatical) subject.

The question of the subject is further explored in the second half of my project, which focuses on the popular television show *Lost*, and the recent films *In Between Days* and *West 32nd*. The subtitling in these works often help heighten the tensions I note between speech and printed text, particularly in the context of translation. To guide my readings of the bilingual Korean characters in these works, I look to the rich history of early Korean cinema. In the early part of the twentieth century, Koreans experimented with different translation technologies amidst the selective distribution of foreign films under the Japanese colonial government, all of which interestingly complicated relations of power in colonial Korea, both on- and off-screen. In my third chapter, “Recalling Early Cinematic Techniques,” I investigate how certain cinematic techniques may help make untranslated and subtitled speech accessible to non-Korean speaking audiences, particularly when viewing the television show *Lost* (2004-2010). These questions of translation immediately lead me to the figure of the *pyonsa*, a narrator who had presented

alongside silent film screenings and translated foreign sound films in colonial Korea. In Korean diasporic films, the *pyonsa* figure is revived in the more contemporary figures of the legal interpreter and professional translator. Other early cinematic traditions and techniques that facilitate the viewing of these films include the use of (selective) subtitles, film titles, shot sequences, and manipulation of the soundtrack.

I continue examining some of these same concerns and explore others in my fourth chapter, “Correspondence and Calligraphic Textuality,” focusing on the feature-length independent films *West 32nd* and *In Between Days*. In these films, communication in the form of postcards and telephone calls is frequently obstructed, calling attention to the (similarly sometimes frustrated) expectations of subtitles to seamlessly translate between languages. Further, an additional layering of subtitling is added in *noraebang* (Korean for karaoke) scenes in both films. In this way, *West 32nd* and *In Between Days* enact a doubling of both screens and subtitles, introducing rich layers of textuality while recalling the titles of early cinema. In its exploration of the historical traces of early cinema and colonialism in these contemporary films, this chapter also draws connections to the recent innovations of South Korean film, which have been received with both popular and critical acclaim.

I conclude with an epilogue that considers how the wide range of Korean and Korean American experiences depicted in *West 32nd* raise questions that have become central within the field of Asian American studies. As diasporic, migratory, and otherwise transitional communities continue to grow, the field of Asian American studies has been more closely examining the histories, cultural productions, and lived experiences of contemporary Asian and Asian American communities.

Timothy Yu reflects on how Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* offers an early model of this more conscious shift in our approach to Asian American literature, as evidenced in its reception over the past several decades. "It was precisely the experimental style of *Dictée* that made it unreadable to Asian American criticism—or, at least, Asian American criticism of the late 1970s onward, which largely overlooked Asian American poetic experiments in favor of the autobiographical narrative" (107). What was overlooked then, and is much more closely attended to now, is "[Cha's] deep engagement with language itself. Personal and historical relationships become, in her work, linguistic ones; persons become understood as positions within language" (106). Theresa Hak Kyung Cha plays with formal features—like punctuation, spacing, and the juxtaposition of text with image—to consider the role of the speaking and performing body throughout *Dictée*, as well as in her film and video work.

As suggested above and has been demonstrated in other nations' histories, the loss of language—and even the threat of denying one's language—is personally trying and complex. Such an experience can be especially troubling when it happens (as it often does) upon displacement, even if the displacement—through exile, adoption, immigration, or as a war or economic refugee—had occurred generations ago. This project does not mean to define how one should relate one's cultural identity through language or how fluent one should be with any particular language. In fact, the sensitivity of such questions and presumptions surrounding identity and language may explain, in part, why language has not been a central focus within Asian American studies. Chang-Rae Lee speaks to this in "The Faintest Echo of Our Language." In this short piece, Lee remembers his mother's death and the languages in which they communicated.

“*Gaen-cha-na*,” she says. *It is fine.*

“Do you need anything?”

“*Ghah*,” she says, flitting her hand, “*kul suh*.” *Go, go and write.*

“What do you want? Anything, anything.”

... This will be our language always. To me she speaks in a child’s Korean, and for her I speak that same child’s English. ... And in our life together, our strange language is the bridge and all that surrounds it; language is the brook streaming through it; it is the mossy stones, the bank, the blooming canopy above, the ceaseless sound, the sky. It is the last earthly thing we have. (26-27)

For Lee, the loss of his mother literalizes the loss of languages, both Korean and their shared way of speaking to one another. For others, the loss of language—even distantly—may result from the loss of other relatives or friends, relocation or further diasporic movement, the pressures of assimilation, or other personal and challenging circumstances. It is with respect to the sensitivity surrounding such losses, as well as the pleasures of studying language(s), that this project looks critically and specifically at the multilinguality of the Korean diaspora.

Chapter One: Between Words / Between Bodies

While commonly overlooked, punctuation marks govern the way writers organize their writing and they also guide the ways readers might imagine how printed text would sound when read aloud. By suggesting pause and inflection at specific moments, punctuation marks further serve as relays between oral and written communication. This chapter explores how punctuation marks facilitate, obstruct, complicate, and play with exchanges within and across oral and written communication, as well as in multilingual contexts. I approach punctuation marks and spacings in terms of negative space, both literally—on the physical page and in breaths between spoken words—and metaphorically, as reflective of unequal relations of power. Further, this chapter argues that the reading of punctuation marks in some texts necessarily draws together disparate languages and histories, as demonstrated in my readings of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*, Ishle Yi Park's *The Temperature of This Water*, and Ronyoung Kim's *Clay Walls*.

This framing of punctuation marks as “relays” is derived from Theodor Adorno's essay on punctuation in which he compares punctuation marks to traffic signals, and distinguishes them as “marks of oral delivery,” rather than simply “marks of communication” (91). In my readings of these works, Adorno's metaphor of “oral” delivery is quite generative for my reading of these works in a number of ways. In addition to functioning as relays between written and spoken language, punctuation marks also support the negotiation of translation between Korean and English. This becomes particularly evident when considering the history of the emergence of Western punctuation in Korean print culture.

Additionally, punctuation becomes a key visual element in the writing out of “hyphenated” American identities and cultures, a question for many culturally marginalized American communities that continues to resonate today. Specifically for Asian Americans, there has been much debate between the choice of the dash, slash, or space between the terms “Asian” and “American.” This discussion has connected the choice of punctuation (or spacing) to issues ranging from grammar, aesthetic considerations, citizenship or residency status, and the direction of one’s migration or multiple travel experiences between Asia and America. In this context, punctuation helps to demonstrate the complexity of defining one’s identity relationally to historically determined and shifting terms. As such, a close reading of punctuation can offer a unique, specific, and even subversive revelation of unequal relations of power. As these central texts of this chapter have all been published within the past three decades, these works engage with contemporary Asian Americanist cultural critique, particularly with respect to their formal qualities. However, the content of these three texts also look backwards to historical events that took place in Korea during the Japanese colonial period.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Korea’s print culture was changing rapidly with rising literacy rates, increased exposure to translated foreign literatures, and the growing acceptance of the use of hangeul. There are also important connections to American modernist experimentation and avant-garde movements that resonate in the texts’ use of specific punctuation marks. While my readings of these texts argue for a broader set of contexts from which to understand these works, my focus on punctuation grounds what would otherwise remain a theoretical and fairly expansive understanding of

how relations between Korea and America in the twentieth century have been represented in literary works.

In my readings of *Dictée*, *The Temperature of This Water*, and *Clay Walls*, punctuation and spacings mark instability, imbalance, and unequal relations of power. In prominent sections of each of these three works, they alternately consider the perspectives of Koreans who had lived through the colonial period, as well as those of Korean Americans approaching this history from longer temporal and greater geographic distances. Particularly as punctuation marks—and to an even greater extent, spacing between words and between lines of printed text—are often overlooked as symbols that simply guide one's reading of printed text, this chapter argues that that which occupies the spaces between words importantly speaks to relations among bodies, communities, and cultures.

The Inclusion of Western Punctuation into Korea's Print Culture

Lynne Truss dedicates her book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*: “To the memory of the striking Bolshevik printers of St Petersburg who, in 1905, demanded to be paid the same rate for punctuation marks as for letters, and thereby directly precipitated the first Russian Revolution” (v). In this dedication, Truss calls attention to the laboring bodies that produce these visual markers for print materials, and highlights the connection between punctuation and political and social change in 1905. Similarly, in Korea, the importation of punctuation and foreign translations simultaneously contributed to and complicated Korea's heightened modernization and nationalistic movements.

As *Dictée*, *The Temperature of This Water*, and *Clay Walls* all attend to key moments in Korean history at the turn of the century, they are often read against the social and political circumstances that frame these texts. In my own readings, I focus on the linguistic context for the radical changes in Korea's print culture, and particularly on the relatively recent inclusion of punctuation marks and spacing between words into the written Korean language. Some of the key factors that contributed to these changes to the Korean language included the rise of imported translations, the Kabo Reforms, and the Japanese colonial presence.

It was only in the final decades of the nineteenth century that Korea's spoken and written languages began to converge. As Jae Jung Song notes, for over a millennium, while Koreans spoke their own distinctively native language, their written system had relied on Chinese characters (16). Then in 1446, King Sejong invented hangeul in order to help increase literacy among the Korean people. However, as hanja (the system of Chinese characters used in Korean written script) was closely associated with class privilege, the spread of hangeul was suppressed by the elite classes for over four centuries until 1894.

In the end (after the passing of King Sejong), Hankul was relegated to the status of a 'vulgar' writing system, used mainly by women and commoners—which is why Hankul was known as Enmun 'Vulgar Writing' until 1912—and this situation would not change until the rise of Korean nationalism in the late nineteenth century. (48)

The Kabo Reforms of 1894-1897 challenged gender and class discriminations and the deliberate marginalization of hangeul. These reforms included the prioritization of the use

of hangeul as a means to forward nationalistic and modernization efforts. While addressing many other large social concerns, the Kabo Reforms importantly included a mandate that all official documents were to be written in hangeul, rather than hanja. In her own study of punctuation and print culture, Paige Sweet cites Julia Kristeva's discussion of "how major shifts in prescriptive grammar use often correspond to turbulent social or political conditions" (96). This was certainly the case in Korea at the turn of the twentieth century during which close connections could be made between Korean print culture and dramatic social and political changes.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, Korean nationalist sentiment had been growing under the threat of Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and American imperial interests. Hence, the turn of the twentieth century proved a turbulent period in which remarkable linguistic development, social change, and a rise of nationalism were fueled by both local impetus and foreign influence. In the late nineteenth century, Koreans had started to pursue educational and professional opportunities in Japan and the United States. Most returned to Korea to share their experiences and to use their newfound knowledge from abroad. Many of them went on to become prominent literary and political figures, and leaders of nationalistic, modernization, and democratic movements of this period. As Korea began to establish trade with other nations, foreign texts began entering Korean literary consciousness through translation, primarily by way of Japan. This exposure to foreign literatures contributed to the growth of Korean nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Theresa Hyun notes: "The threat of aggression from abroad was one of the important factors that encouraged Korean translators to turn to texts dealing with the lives

of patriotic heroes from other countries” (24). As Lawrence Venuti and Naoki Sakai each note, this is a practice also evident in many other cultures.² While Hyun’s statement relates more directly to the years leading up to the Japanese colonial period, this remained true even after Korea’s main aggressor realized the goal of occupying the Korean peninsula. For instance, Heekyoung Cho cites records of “89 total translations from Western literature during the decade of the 1910s [and] 671 for the 1920s” (48). These numbers demonstrate not only a steep rise in the publication of translations, but they also suggest that Japan had a large part in facilitating this trend, as these years coincide with the early part of the Japanese colonial period.

Aside from the content of these works, the form of these writings also influenced changes to the Korean language and literature. Specifically, the Western system of punctuation marks and spacings was not originally included in either hanja or hangeul. The wider acceptance of punctuation and spacing in the Korean written script began generally in the early part of the twentieth century, concurrent with the increase in Korean translations of Japanese, Russian, American, and European literary works.³ To date, there has been little critical attention paid to the emergence of punctuation and spacing in Korean in both Korean- and English-language texts. To guide this investigation, I refer to the changes in the written language in the Korean newspapers, *Dongnip Sinmun*, *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*, based on my research conducted in the Korean archives at the Library of Congress.

² See Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* for examples of European countries similarly using foreign translation for nationalistic and nation-building movements and Naoki Sakai’s *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* for his discussion on the role of translation in the construction of national identity.

³ Please see Heekyoung Cho’s article, “Rewriting Chekhov: Translation, Journalism, and Modern Literature in 1920s Korea,” for titles of Russian literary works that had been translated into Korean and Theresa Hyun’s *Writing Women in Korea: Translation and Feminism in the Colonial Period* pp. 29-30 for titles of histories and biographies that were translated into Korean during this time.

Published from 1896-1898, *Dongnip Sinmun* (The Independent) constitutes an under-recognized, but an important part of the modern Korean literary canon, and demonstrates concerted effort to enact linguistic change. The newspaper had been founded by Seo Jae-pil, the first Korean to become a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1890.⁴ Following a period of study in Japan, Seo continued his education at the George Washington University, where he became the first Korean to receive an American medical degree in 1892. As Michael Robinson notes, Seo's founding *Dongnip Sinmun* upon his return to Korea expressed his concern for "national cultural unity and linguistic identity" (24). Seo became a key figure in Korea's struggle for independence and he demonstrated his commitment to Korean independence in both the form and content of this publication.

In its first year of printing, the paper consisted of four pages: three pages printed in hangeul and a final page in English. In its inaugural edition, on April 7, 1896, an official English-language statement made explicit the paper's interest in being as accessible as possible:

[*Dongnip Sinmun*] has been put in the native character called the on-mun ... which for simplicity of construction and phonetic power compares favorably with the best alphabets in the world. Difficulty is experienced by those not thoroughly acquainted with the on-mun from the fact that ordinarily there are no spaces between words. We therefore adopt the novel plan of introducing spaces, thus doing away with the main objection to its use.

⁴ Alternately Sŏ Chaep'il. His Anglicized name is Philip Jaisohn.

As different groupings of the same Korean characters can suggest a variety of different meanings, depending on the position of spacing between its characters, the inclusion of spacing is significant in helping to guide the reader's comprehension. *Dongnip Sinmun's* shifting from hanja to hangeul (or on-mun, as it was then called) and the introduction of spacing were both radical choices at the time. These two considerations helped widen newspaper readerships and the increased usage of hangeul also eventually provided a means of unification and political organizing for the Korean people, particularly against Japanese imperialism.

Further, the newspaper's decisions about language and format comprised a political choice, not only in its goal to help raise literacy rates in Korea, but also as a means to more widely disseminate information about the major social changes that were taking place. The inaugural edition further stated that *Dongnip Sinmun* intended "to give Koreans a reliable account of the events that are transpiring, to give reasons for things that often seem to them unreasonable, to bring the capital and the provinces into greater harmony through a mutual understanding of each other's needs, especially the need that each has of the other."

Not only did the content of these hangeul characters inform readers of these events, the physical markings of these characters—and the negative space that more clearly organized them—also symbolized the political and social shifts of the times.

Now that that the old order of things is passing away, society is in a state which might be described as intermediate between two forms of crystallization. The old combinations of forces have been broken up or are

rapidly breaking up and they are seeking new affinities. The near future will probably decide the mode of rearrangement of the social forces.

In this statement, the *Dongnip Sinmun* is speaking to the evolution of the language being printed and read, as well as the readers and writers who are actively experiencing these linguistic shifts. In doing so, the text relies on metaphors that allude to physical change—in terms of destruction, reconstruction, and rearrangement—to evoke the social and political change already affecting the Korean populace. This demonstrates how the changing language and the changing social circumstances were continually informing each other at the turn of the twentieth century, and into the early decades. While *Dongnip Sinmun* did not print a comparable statement on punctuation, within the first year of its publication, the hangeul pages began to include visual marks to organize its sentences, while the entirety of the English language pages included punctuation marks from its first issue.

The two newspapers *Dong-A Ilbo* (East Asia Daily) and *Chosun Ilbo* (Korean Daily) offer later examples of notable intersections between social change and shifts in print culture during the colonial period. The dates of their founding, as well as those of their interruptions, unsurprisingly follow organized uprisings and protests against the Japanese colonial government. Both of these newspapers were founded in 1920, soon after the March 1, 1919 Independence movement against Japan's occupation of Korea. The first decade of Japanese occupation from 1909-1919 has become known as the Military Rule during which Japanese officials violently repressed Korean society, ultimately provoking organized resistance that culminated in the multiple demonstrations coordinated across the country on March 1, 1919. The scale of this movement, which was

organized across cities and towns throughout the Korean peninsula, took the Japanese imperial government by surprise. The Japanese government responded with strong military force but also consented to relaxing some of the restrictions against schools, newspapers, and businesses. These major social upheavals forced the colonial government to modify its policies, ushering in the more accommodating period of Cultural Rule in 1920. One important policy change made in 1920 was the lifting of the ban on newspapers and the publication of political commentary (Robinson 45). It was in this period of accommodation that *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* were founded and had started to become established as national newspapers. They remain two of the most widely read South Korean newspapers today.

The earliest editions of both *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* were printed primarily in hanja, with the inclusion of some Korean characters for clarification in the form of conjunctions and sentence endings. The use of hanja with hangeul word endings was common in other printed texts at the time, as well. While this continued practice in *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* may seem regressive, in light of *Dongnip Sinmun*'s notable reliance on just hangeul and English, this further highlights Seo Jaepil's impressive prescience and radical literary stances.

The text in the *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* articles is printed vertically, and the lines of text progress from right to left. Often in *Dong-A Ilbo*, the use of hangeul would gradually increase toward the latter pages of its issues. *Chosun Ilbo* more consistently maintained its reliance on hanja in its issues through the 1920s. By the early 1930s, however, both newspapers had started to include various forms of punctuation and noticeable spacing between words. Both newspapers also started to include English

language correspondence written by prominent contemporary figures, such as Seo Jae-pil and American missionaries who were actively involved in Korean society. These letters were often printed prominently on the front pages. The inclusion of punctuation marks, spacing, and the English language, as well as the shift to printing text horizontally gradually increased over the decades. As hangeul had once provided word and sentence endings for text written in hanja, punctuation marks began to replace certain structural endings that differentiated between statements, questions, and exclamations.⁵

In her study of the Japanese language during this time period, Nanette Twine offers an instructive comparative case. Like the Koreans' long reliance on hanja, the Japanese similarly relied heavily on kanji, the Japanese written system of Chinese characters, which continued into the early twentieth century. As was the case with hanja, Twine notes that until the mid-nineteenth century, the Japanese written language was composed as solid blocks of text in kanji with little "visual variation" to distinguish individual words or sentences (251). "[T]here was often a total lack of punctuation to show phrasing within a sentence or paragraph. No spaces separated words; to extract the sense of the passage, the reader had to be able to recognize sentence finals and other grammatical signals indicating function" (17). However, as early as 1906, "the practice of punctuation was well established, and later writers continued to use it both as an indication of the sense of their text and as an aid in stamping their own individual styles upon the written language" (256).

Twine similarly attributes changes in the written Japanese script to Japan's heightened contact with Western literatures:

⁵ For a more extensive discussion, see Samuel E. Martin's *A Reference Grammar of Korean: A Complete Guide to the Grammar and History of the Korean Language* 18-21.

In this area, as in many others, the need for reform was highlighted by exposure to the west. Those who came in contact with western prose could not help noticing, in addition to the clarity and versatility of its colloquial style and the conciseness and simplicity of its alphabet, the ease with which punctuation imparted to the deciphering of its content. (251)

At this time, the Japanese and Korean languages were experiencing similar changes under comparable circumstances. Namely, there was a strong push for modernization and a concerted effort to raise literacy rates, amidst a rise in the importation and translation of foreign literatures.

One significant difference between the Korean and Japanese written scripts in this period, however, is that in Japan, an Imperial reform was announced, marking an official change to the written language:

An Imperial proclamation issued on New Year's Day 1946 incorporated two orthographic innovations not seen together in earlier proclamations which represented the first step towards making such texts more readable. These were the use of punctuation, never before found here, and the addition of *nigori* marks to distinguish between voiced and unvoiced consonants in *katakana* portions of the text. The latter had been seen a few times before, but this was the first time it had been undertaken in conjunction with improved spatial organization of the script. (178)

This focus on readability and “improved spatial organization” speaks directly to the rising literacy rates in Japan. The democratization of language is further evidenced by

restrictions on the use of kanji, which had been accessible primarily to highly educated members of society.

No official reform had been announced in Korea, which makes documentation and research on such linguistic changes more challenging. However, in light of Japan's colonial governance of Korea and Japan's key role in introducing foreign texts to the Korean readership, a consideration of Japan's own changes to its print language can offer much insight into Korean print culture during this time period. Often, writers' experimentation with literary form precedes official recognition of linguistic change. Such was the case in Japan. Prior to the imperial announcement of the reform of the Japanese script, Japanese journalists and creative writers had already started to experiment with punctuation and spacing. In this sense, looking to examples of print news and creative writing in early-twentieth century Korea can also be instructive in exploring Koreans' experimentation with punctuation and spacing.

In fact, during this time in Korea, literature and the news began to inform each other more directly than they had in the past. Works of fiction (and particularly translations of foreign literature) were increasingly serialized in newspapers, and contemporary events circulated in newspapers informed the work of creative writers. The changing print and evolving print culture facilitated closer and more frequent interactions between journalists and creative writers.⁶ This series of exchanges further facilitated the establishment of a standardized system of punctuation and spacing in the Korean written script.

⁶ For more on this topic, see Heekyoung Cho's "Rewriting Chekhov: Translation, Journalism, and Modern Literature in 1920s Korea," and the introduction to Chong-un Kim and Bruce Fulton's edited and translated *A Ready-Made Life: Early Masters of Modern Korean Fiction*.

Currently, while much of the punctuation and spacing usage in Korean has become standardized in written Korean, there are still many instances in which its usage is not uniform, or that punctuation is not included at all. The range of punctuation marks used in hangeul today includes both Korean punctuation (with notable similarities to other East Asian scripts) and Western punctuation. Spacing between words has also become an important and widely used element of written Korean. In fact, the literal translation of the Korean term “ddui-eo-sseu-ki” (어쓰기) is “writing [words] with spacing between them” and is used solely in the context of written or printed text.

Lee Sun Woong and Chung Hee Chang explain how in contemporary written Korean, the spacing between words facilitates and speeds the reading of the text. Further, even with the same set of characters, variations in spacings can connote entirely different meanings. Whereas in many other languages, misplaced spacing can be easily identifiable as a structural error, such mistakes in Korean may still generate grammatically correct—and contextually plausible statements.⁷ For example, the sentence “아버지가 방에 들어가신다” (abuji-ka bang-e deureokashinda) means “My father is going into the room,” whereas if one spacing is shifted such that the 가 (ka) character is detached from the end of 아버지 (abuji) and attached to 방 (bang), the sentence would become “아버지가방에 들어가신다” (abuji kabang-e deureokashinda), which would mean “My father is getting into the bag.” The frequent potential for such misunderstanding can create some

⁷ Such examples may be found in 「우리말 우리글 묻고 답하기」 *Woorimal Woorigeul, Mootko Dap'haki* 23-26

confusion without sufficient context. The above example is a popularly cited instance of deliberate word play.

Such structural details as spacing and punctuation are significant as they not only focus attention on the evolution of the written Korean language, but also offer written markers that inform how one would read the written text out loud. The gradual inclusion of the English language, punctuation, and spacing, as well as the shift to printing the text to be read horizontally, was not sequentially consistent but generally increased over the decades. As the readings of texts below demonstrate, the history of the emergence of punctuation marks and spacings in hangeul, and their subsequent potential to disrupt, clarify, and produce an excess of meanings that make these marks and spacings uniquely ambivalent components of not only the Korean written language, but also strangely ambivalent elements within Asian American texts.

Waiting On, Taking On, Becoming Punctuation in *Dictee*

While punctuation marks and spacings are usually overlooked, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* calls special attention to them and seems to meditate on the spaces they occupy, as is evident in its widely-cited opening. The dictation exercise on the first numbered page of *Dictee* draws attention to the challenges of translation—between the French and English, between the spoken and written, and between the silent and the voiced.

Aller à la ligne C'était le premier jour point Elle venait de loin
 point ce soir au dîner virgule les familles demanderaient virgule
 ouvre les guillemets Ça c'est bien passé le premier jour ... Open

paragraph It was the first day period She had come from a far
 period tonight at dinner comma the families would ask comma
 open quotation marks How was the first day

This exercise is commonly read as that of a student taking dictation from a teacher. This passage is notable for both its form and content. Many scholars read this scene as one in which a teacher is prompting a student during a dictation exercise in which the student is asked to transcribe what the teacher is saying. This task is made more complicated as the student is not only translating from spoken to written language, but also translating from French to English.

As many scholars have noted, what is striking about this dictation and translation is the punctuation marks that the student includes in the dictation exercise. Rather than reproducing the punctuation marks as visual markers, the student writes out the actual words that name them. As a result, the paragraph does not visually conform to what the teacher likely expects. In fact, the student's version does not have any punctuation marks at all, in the form in which they are usually seen. Punctuation marks are often overlooked while expected to set sentences and phrases apart from one another, and to help visually organize words to facilitate the reading of a given text. The opposite is happening in this written exercise, as the punctuation marks are made *more*—rather than less—prominent. And as they are written out as words instead of as symbols, in a quick glance, they are indistinguishable from the rest of the text, which makes the entire passage even *more* difficult to read. Further, by writing them out as words, the student greatly expands the amount of space that each punctuation mark would have taken in their expected form.

This dictation has been read alternately as an example of deviation,⁸ displacement,⁹ or refusal and disruption.¹⁰ Before considering the “unfaithfulness” of the translation produced, it is important to note the ways in which the student *faithfully* reproduces aspects of the spoken French dictation in the written English version.¹¹ The late nineteenth-century literary theorist and translator, Shimei Futabatei offers instructive examples in his concern for representative accuracy in his own translations. Futabatei attempted to maintain the exact punctuation of his translations of Russian literary works into Japanese, in order to maintain both consistency of content and form: “In translating foreign literature, one runs the risk of spoiling the original if one concentrates only on meaning. I myself was convinced of the necessity to grasp and reproduce the rhythm of the original text; I therefore did not dispense arbitrarily with even a single comma or period” (Twine 254).

Ultimately, however, Futabatei was unable to maintain this approach throughout the entirety of his translations, despite “expend[ing] considerable effort on the matter of form, even going so far as to use the same number of words as the original in an effort to reproduce the rhythm with absolute fidelity” (Twine 254). Josephine Nock-Hee Park notes a similar attention to the placement of punctuation marks in the opening of *Dictée*: “These punctuation marks keep their spoken places despite the transport from one language to another; they persist across the border between languages. These marks can be faithfully translated in a way that the other words in the exercise cannot be ...” (“What of the Partition” 215). In this sense, the student’s “literal” transcription of the

⁸ Lisa Lowe. “Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*.” 40.

⁹ Lisa Hyun Yi Kang, “The ‘Liberatory Voice’ of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*.” 85.

¹⁰ Sue-In Lee, “Suspicious Characters: Realism, Asian American Identity, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*.” 244.

¹¹ This particular use of the term “unfaithful” refers to the title of Lisa Lowe’s essay.

punctuation in *Dictee* reads as a creative response to the particular kind of challenge undertaken by Futabatei.

While some of the scholarly criticism on *Dictee* acknowledges the ambivalence of the student's subversive disobedience, many critics choose to read the dictation as the student's being reactionary against an authority figure.¹² For instance, Lisa Lowe offers a reading of this scene as the first in a series of situations representing unequal relations of power throughout the work: "the student's pedagogical disobedience, the colonized subject's antagonism to the empire, the religious subject's incommensurability to God, and the racialized citizen's discontinuity with the state" (37). In each instance, the threat of discipline seems to be the primary force governing the subject's behavior. Lowe's reading is significant in linking the presence of the Protestant evangelism, Japanese colonialism, as well as American imperialism in Korea all to this single dictation exercise.

Of course, such foreign pressures also significantly influenced the language and literature in Korea during this time. Lowe expands on this, as she reads the opening dictation exercise as a metaphor for the "cultural and ideological systems [that] transform individuals into subjects, reminding us to read *Dictee* in terms of the differentiated layers of colonial and imperial languages within and against which it is written" (43). The attempted transformations produce "subjects episodically and incompletely formed within linguistically and historically differentiated circumstances" (43).

We should be careful to note that in these instances of transformation and translation, there exists the potential for problematic assumptions of passivity and

¹² See Timothy Yu's chapter on *Dictee* in his *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* for a usefully comprehensive review on *Dictee*'s critical reception since its initial publication.

inferiority associated with the individual subjects. Notably, when considering the expansion of spaces marked out between words in the dictation exercise, the student does not simply settle for the remaining space, negatively defined against what the teacher has explicitly staked out in the dictation. Rather, the student uses this negative space as a starting point to push out and to create an even larger space in which to articulate disagreement with what is being dictated. In this way, contextualizing the punctuation in *Dictee* in the history of the changing Korean language productively opens up ways to understand the speaker's agency, even under such restrictions imposed by imperial rule or by cultural marginalization. In this way *Dictee* offers ways to imagine how the colonized Koreans could have creatively worked towards a means of self-expression.

My reading privileges the state of ambivalence that many scholars have noted, to reconsider how relations of power can be depicted in less static terms. In doing so, I take up the language that Lawrence Venuti uses in discussing two different translation methods:

... a *domesticating* method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a *foreignizing* method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad. (20) (italics mine)

This passage often frames the student's dictation as a rebellious *response* against a *foreign* authority. While I certainly agree with this reading, I would hesitate to end the discussion there. Rather, I am interested in more deeply considering how the student can further her participation in this situation as an active *agent* (even within constricted

circumstances) and how the dictation's production is informed by *domestic* influences (within Korea and specifically on Korea's print culture).

Ed Park notes a similar shifting of linguistic and cultural frames in his discussion of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Exilee*, a work that involves the projection of a film on a specially constructed wall, with a small rectangle cut out in the middle to show the screening of a video on a television monitor. Similar to *Dictee*, *Exilee* also consciously plays against distinctions among genres, media, and languages. "As with *Dictee*, the title [of *Exilee*] itself performs an initial alienation—French instead of English, which conjures Cha's more primal exchange, English instead of Korean" (11). This shifting also highlights the productive tension between the personal and the historical, a tension that is raised in nearly all of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's work, and especially in *Dictee*.

In (at least for the moment) privileging the historical shifting from hanja to hangeul, the opening scene of *Dictee* evokes the literal changes in the Korean script and its connection to the nationalistic and modernization movements in the beginning of the twentieth century. In this way, the dictation functions as an account of the negotiations enacted in the convergence of spoken and written Korean during this time. The foreignizing effect of the student's writing out of each punctuation mark evokes the initial foreignness of punctuation and spacing in early twentieth-century Korean print, particularly as demonstrated in *Dongnip Sinmun*.

The punctuation and spacing in *Dictee* has also been read as contextualized against American experimental poetry. For instance, Juliana Spahr considers the specific connections that can be made between the work of Gertrude Stein and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Further, Josephine Nock-Hee Park discusses the formal concerns of both

American Modernists and Asian American poets and Timothy Yu explores such shared investments between white American avant-garde poets and Asian American poets, with *Dictee* as a central example in each of their respective discussions. All of the other twentieth-century American writers mentioned in Spahr, Park, and Yu's critical studies demonstrate an interest in literary experimentation, particularly in the formal qualities of punctuation and spacing. However, the ways in which they engage (or, more often, the ways in which they do *not* engage) with race distinguishes their work from that of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. However, as Spahr, Park, and Yu argue, many of the modernist and avant-garde texts they discuss are produced while the writers are traveling abroad, being influenced by non-white cultural traditions, seeing (but not necessarily personally experiencing) heightened migrations of immigrant groups to the United States, or demonstrating against American imperialism overseas. In these specific contexts, the selective appropriation of racial, ethnic, or culturally specific representations is notable, and their absence, is even more so.

Josephine Nock-Hee Park notes that "while modernist Orientalism rendered the Asiatic sign as a silent figure, artists of the Asian American movement in the late 1960s forged an ethnic coalition to sound a new voice in American literature and culture" (*Apparitions* 3). Park continues her discussion, with a particular focus on the works of Ezra Pound and Gary Snyder, before shifting her attention to Asian American experimental poets. In her own study, Juliana Spahr also forwards this perspective: "Anglo-modernism failed on resolving race issues, on actually building a linguistic coalition of attack on dominant culture's exclusivity" (21). However, Spahr does offer a

reading of Gertrude Stein that presents a redemptive point on this line of criticism.

Though the content of Stein's work does not explicitly explore race, Spahr argues that:

Stein's insistence that her work is rooted in an immigrant U.S. tradition, and not in the cosmopolitan or worldly or international European-centered one that so enamored T.S. Eliot, Henry James, and Ezra Pound, is telling. Her tendency to align with and kindly mimic the language patterns of second-language speakers is itself a revision of what it means to be writing American literature. (31)

Spahr notes that while there is no concrete evidence that Theresa Hak Kyung Cha had been reading Gertrude Stein, some of Spahr's observations of *Dictee* can be easily attributed to Stein's own writing: "[Cha's] use of these [grammatical] 'mistakes' is strategic rather than unintentional. ... She exposes the constructed nature of language by using forms of grammatical hesitation, such as spaces or periods between phrases ... and fractured words" (131). Further, while Stein deliberately absents punctuation marks from her writing (as she explicitly discusses in "Poetry and Grammar" in *Lectures in America*), her attention to punctuation and her creative use of spacing between lines and all across the page can productively inform readings of *Dictee*.

Timothy Yu follows Park's above argument in reading the work of white American experimental poets:

For these white European and American avant-gardists, racial others offered an escape from Western aesthetics, serving as a source for the revolutionary breakthroughs that have characterized the twentieth-century avant-garde. ... [W]hite Americans' interest remained fixed on Asia itself,

not Asians in America; the search for otherness led overseas (Ginsberg to India, Snyder to Japan) but not to the domestic productions of Asian Americans. (1, 11)

Thus, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's close personal and artistic affiliation with white American and European avant-gardists made the reception of her work challenging for audiences, as *Dictee* "reveals the limits of our dominant paradigms of reading and forces us to return to the wider avant-garde contexts from which both Asian American and experimental writing emerge" (103). Each individual example of Cha's work presents elements of style and content that had not been commonly seen in a single work, namely multilingual, experimental material that included Asian elements in a way that was neither Orientalist nor confessional. As such, "for many critics, Cha's formal difference was sometimes easily read as cultural difference, as foreignness—a slippage that haunts not only white critics but later Asian American critics as well" (109).

As Timothy Yu cautions audiences against reading Cha's experimental writing too simply and inaccurately as ornamental signifiers of cultural difference, I explore the different ways in which multilingual texts can be read literally, symbolically, and abstractly by different communities of language speakers with varied access to multiple languages. In this particular instance, in grounding Cha's formal difference in less abstract terms, Yu suggests that Cha explores how colonialism uses language, while also experimenting with formal aspects of language, as a means to explore the complexities of colonialism: "The colonizer, Cha argues, presents itself to the colonized through language. . . . The colonial relationship thus 'becomes abstract' by moving onto the terrain of writing, language, and linguistic structure, where it becomes all the more insidious

because it is no longer explicitly attached to markers of race and nation” (131). In this way, Yu focuses Lisa Lowe’s articulation of Cha’s concern with relations of power and demonstrates how Cha herself explores these relations through formal experimentation of language.

As Jennifer Brody notes: “In highlighting typography, I want to remember that writing has been a tool of colonization and power” (63). Juliana Spahr seems to continue this thought in her own reading of the dictation exercise in *Dictee* as “a decolonization of reading”: “When punctuation symbol turns to word, as the act of vocal proofreading makes clear, it no longer functions as a silent director of reading that monitors the flow of the sentence” (134). Rather than support a faithful reproduction of a reading exercise, the punctuation marks disrupt the reading practice from within the text itself. “Dictation turns here from a passive act that mimics brainwashing into an active one with its own, often political, agenda, nonstandard English and French, translation, and multilingualism” (128). Notably, Spahr’s discussion of dictation and quotation in *Dictee* extends beyond this opening dictation exercise to include the image- and text-based materials incorporated throughout the entire work.

The deconstruction and productive disruption that the punctuation marks enact here are comparable to Paula Rabinowitz’s reading of James Agee’s own use of punctuation: “For the practice of writing is a commitment to the process of unwriting, erasing the text preceding the next outburst by way of his gaps, his parentheses, his sustained phrasing ...” (122). In both *Dictee* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, punctuation marks provide a way out of the structures of language and language practices, actively engaging the audience to participate in new constructions of meaning.

If the conventional uses of language *move* it toward a telos, then, deconstruction specializes in de-motioning—de-motivating—such a telos by foregrounding its sequentiality—its temporal differentiation. . . .

Language, we are told, “always already” contains the clues to its own undoing; language takes itself apart before anyone else does.

(Chow, *Writing Diaspora* 174)

In *Dictee*, it is punctuation that makes the undoing of language most evident.

The extreme care that the student takes with the dictation in reproducing that which occupies the spaces between words—both punctuation marks and deliberate spaces—is simultaneously *too* accurate and *inaccurate*. In other words, it is both too literal while also being deviant. This clever irony is made explicit in the second line of the dictation exercise, which translates “Elle venait de loin” to “She had come from a far.” The English translation visually reproduces the space between the final two words in the French by separating the single English word “afar” into two distinct words. “A far” also mimics the emphatic double stress of the final two syllables in “de loin,” that “afar” as a single word would have lost. Shelley Sunn Wong observes: “In breaking up the word ‘afar,’ Cha inserts distances within distances. It is from within those distances that the speaker begins to interrogate the adequacy of conventional taxonomies in assigning origin and identity” (124). The distances become literalized in *Dictee*, as each instance of repetition seems to move “a far” further away from the original French referent “de loin.”

“A far” is repeated once again in the same passage. Then the next repetition of the detached “a far” in *Dictee* is included in a later section that begins with the line “From A Far” without any mention of the French referent, “de loin” (20). In fact, the page is

composed entirely in English. “From A Far” is followed by a series of interrogations about nationality, lineage, and ancestry. The subsequent lines are all similarly composed as incomplete sentences and lack punctuation marks. Their interrogative function is suggested primarily by the word “what.” Eleven of the fourteen lines begin with this word.

In reading this later section, Anne An-lin Cheng notes: “Beginning with distance (“From A Far”), the passage concludes with a movement of relocation (“transplant”) that is equivalent to an act of dissipation (“to dispel upon”). We have gone from distances . . . to distances” (151). In redirecting Shelley Sunn Wong’s earlier reading of Cha’s insertion of “distances within distances” to the movement of distances to even further distances, Cheng suggests a potentially collective journey, both the start and destination of which is ambiguous. Just as geographical specificity remains unclear, the speaker and audience remain unidentified, as is the case in much of *Dictee*.

In one of few exceptional instances, following immediately after the dictation exercise, a third-person female gendered pronoun is introduced: “She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.)” (3). A labored attempt to produce sound follows, involving the entire body: the lips, the neck, the head, the shoulders. An unnamed, unnumbered, ungendered multitude appears and seems to surround her. “She allows herself caught in their threading, anonymously in their thick motion of the weight of their utterance” (4). The weight soon shifts from the utterance to the weight of the silence between utterances. “She waits inside the pause. . . . *She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation*” (4). A

final variation of the above passage emerges near the end of *Dictée*: “The muteness. The void muteness. Void after uttering. Of. Each phrase. Of each word. All but. Punctuation, pauses. Void after uttering of each phrase. Of each word. All but. Punctuation. Pauses” (106). These short phrases lack both grammatical subjects and verbs, suggesting that “she” had, in fact, succeeded in becoming the punctuation and the pauses, the two perhaps signifying the distances and distances “from a far.”

Renegotiating Spacings and Distances in *The Temperature of This Water*

In the title of her collection and in the stories and poetry it contains, Ishle Yi Park calls attention to the physical distances waters impose between lands, communities, and individuals. These waters include those surrounding the historically matriarchal Jeju Island in Korea; the dock at Fort Totten, Queens, where the East River and Long Island Sound meet; and water in the form of rivers, flash floods, snow, dew, and perspiration. In fact, Ishle’s Korean name (이슬) means “dew.” The distances recalled in her poetry are further evoked in the way Park plays with the white space between individual words, as well as between the lines of text on the printed pages of her collection. She alternates between imposing greater distances between words and lines and then drawing them back together with hyphens or slashes. This use of punctuation to join words together does not necessarily make the reading of her work easier or clearer. “By performing the mid-point, hyphens occupy ‘impossible’ positions. The spatio-temporal action of the hyphen makes it a point of controversy. Hyphens can be problematic because they migrate, appearing and disappearing seemingly without fixed rules” (Brody 85). In other instances, Park deletes the space between words entirely, collapsing words into her own neologisms,

using familiar words to make strange, new meanings. Working between languages, between media, and between cultures, Ishle Yi Park experiments with the physical space of the printed page to stretch these “impossible positions” of hyphens, slashes, and spaces to remarkable ends.

This kind of experimentation may be most explicit in Park’s poem, “House of Sharing.” In both form and content, this poem evokes the persistent placelessness of Korean women who have been euphemistically called “comfort women.” On the printed page, the title of the poem, “House of Sharing,” is immediately followed by the line “Comfort Women” (71). An expanse of white space separates these two lines from the first lines of the body of the poem. While the title is both bolded and capitalized, the text “Comfort Women” is capitalized but not in bold font. The formatting of the page would suggest that “Comfort Women” may be a part of the title, but it is not listed in the book’s table of contents. In this sense, the physical form of the poem is instructive in demonstrating how even the printed words, “Comfort Women,” do not have a clear place in the poem’s opening as either a part of the title or as part of the body of the poem. It seems to float between the two distinct parts of the poem, without obviously belonging to either.

The physical ambiguity of this line’s place in the poem and the lack of clarity regarding its function strongly evoke the troublingly ambivalent role of former comfort women in contemporary South Korean society. The term, “comfort women,” describes women who had been forced to perform sexual services for the Japanese military during

the period of Japanese occupation.¹³ Most of these women were adolescents, and many were in their early teens. The majority of comfort women did not survive the physical and sexual abuse they were forced to endure. Many of these women were kidnapped or tricked into “volunteering” thinking they would serve as nurses. In other cases, families were coerced into offering their daughters in exchange for their being allowed to keep their property. While women were “recruited” from various countries—including Indonesia, Taiwan, China, and the Philippines—the majority of comfort women were from Korea. Of those women who had survived their time as comfort women, many have been disowned by their families and marginalized from Korean society because of the shame associated with the activities they had been forced to perform. To this day, records of Korean comfort women are incomplete because of the reluctance of many women to disclose this part of their personal (and national) history, and will remain so as members of this generation of women are passing away.

Park’s poem focuses on one Korean former comfort woman, who is identified simply as “halmoni,” which means “grandmother” in Korean. The term “halmoni” most immediately refers to one’s own birth grandmother, but this term also commonly serves as a respectful term for elderly (Korean) women in general, including strangers. For many decades, the majority of former comfort women have been silent or have been silenced about their past; only recently have they started to organize and call attention to these injustices. Thus, the speaker’s identification of these women as “halmoni” signals a political act in acknowledging their reclamation of a respectful position within Korean society.

¹³ For further study, see references such as Chunghee Sarah Soh’s *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (2008) and Dai Sil Kim-Gibson’s documentary *Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women* (2000).

The title “House of Sharing” refers to a place of the same name that serves as both a museum and residence for former comfort women, where the halmoni of the poem now lives.¹⁴ Together with the other women who share this residence, this halmoni regularly participates in weekly demonstrations at the Japanese embassy in Seoul, to demand reparations for comfort women. The halmoni was fourteen years old when her parents sent her away, thinking they were sending her “to a good place.”

Contrasting against the ambiguity of the line, “Comfort Women,” the three hyphenated words in the poem—“silver-streaked,” “red-pepper,” and “glass-shielded”—signal the poem’s attempts at reestablishing connections between the former comfort women and the rest of Korean society. Each of these hyphenated words connotes a boundary between the marginalized and the socially accepted majority, highlighting the challenges former comfort women have faced—which they continue to face today—in negotiating their place in contemporary Korean society. “In their most contentious role, hyphens locate intermediate, often invisible, and shifting spaces between what often are supposedly oppositional binary structures” (Brody 85). While binary oppositions are not conjured by the word pairings themselves, the hyphenated words call attention to the binaries constructed by social mores and boundaries that often draw sharp distinctions within Korean society. It is the policing of these social customs that have marginalized this community of women.

¹⁴ “The House of Sharing is both a museum and home to former “Comfort Women” - survivors of sexual slavery at the hands of the Japanese military during the Asia-Pacific War (1932-1945). The House of Sharing is the world’s first human rights museum centred on the theme of sexual slavery. The museum opened on August 14th, 1998 to record Japanese war crimes, to restore the honor of the victims and to function as a place of historical education.”
<http://www.houseofsharing.org> (accessed 8 December 2010).

The speaker of the poem relates how the halmoni narrates her experience of “serving” the Japanese military as she “wipes red-pepper stains / from the concrete windowsill.” Red-pepper flakes and red-pepper sauces, both of which can leave behind stains, are among the main staples of Korean cuisine, the preparation of which is traditionally expected from the women in the household. However, the consumption of food is not mentioned at all in the poem. Instead, the presence of the red-pepper stains, or traces of some unnamed past occurrence seems to take an ominous tone, especially as the halmoni is cleaning while sharing difficult details of her past. From the limited context of the poem, the color and pungency of red-pepper on concrete would most directly evoke the blood that had been spilled from her rudimentary operation onto her stone bed, when “[t]hey cut her open / because she was too small.” In this sense, the red-pepper stains remain as a trace of the halmoni herself becoming an object of (repeated) consumption. The physical location of the windowsill most strongly emphasizes the impossible position of the hyphens in this poem. The windowsill marks the space in which the domestic interior meets the exterior of the home, which further evokes the painful exposure of her internal parts in her rudimentary surgical procedure that preceded her work as a comfort woman. As her involvement in organized nonviolent protests would attest, the halmoni straddles both spaces within and without the home, in challenging presumptions of social behaviors expected from elderly Korean women.

The speaker describes the halmoni’s carefully assembled appearance as similar to that of most other elderly Korean women who dress in traditional clothing. She arranges her “silver-streaked hair / marcelled down her neck” and wears “a hanbok of 5 layers like / a white lotus.” However, when she prepares to go to “her 882nd [weekly] rally,” she

bundles up in two wool coats. As these coats are worn over her hanbok, they represent the halmoni's determination to demonstrate for the rights and reparations for former comfort women, even though it requires her to compromise the assembly of her traditional dress. At these rallies, her actions would further set her apart from other halmoni in Korean society, who do not share her painful history. The halmoni of this poem calls attention to historical injustices, and airs her own personal grievances, all of which directly conflict with social expectations of older Korean women. It is there that she confronts "glass-shielded policemen / young enough to be grandsons."

The policemen are called to reestablish social order between the group of demonstrating halmoni and the rest of the Korean populace. The police officers press against them with glass shields that serve as a physical divider to separate themselves from the older women. However, these glass shields do not go as far as to hide the elderly protesters and the young policemen from each other's line of sight. Just as the tactile force they use against the halmoni is limiting in their intention to maintain the silence around this part of Korea's history, the physicality of the glass shields cannot keep the respective gazes of the halmoni and the policemen from meeting. The glass shields and the presumably rigid social order governing "respectable women's behavior" demonstrate that physical and social boundaries are much more porous than official national narratives have been willing to acknowledge. However, the crossings of such boundaries are not entirely painless.

Jacques Derrida considers the costs of such crossings. In reflecting on the hyphen in the term "Franco-Maghrebian," he finds that it occupies a violent and impossible space. "The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single

torment, not a single torture. . . . A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs” (*Monolingualism* 11). Though relatively small in size, the hyphen can reveal ruptures that have been too-quickly glossed over in popular understandings of historical accounts. By reorganizing the space surrounding her choice of words, the distances between these words, and the marks that occupy these spaces, Ishle Yi Park invites her audience to reconstruct narratives of Korean and Korean American experiences.

In other parts of her work, Ishle Yi Park’s use of punctuation similarly challenges conceptions of space, especially in her more direct engagements with multilinguality. While she writes primarily in English, her work also includes Korean, Spanish, and Chinese. Park does not italicize the non-English words. Neither are the individual syllables of these words separated by hyphens or spaces, a common practice (particularly with transliterated Korean) to help guide pronunciation. Non-English phrases are also not directly translated, though the English phrasings around these words offer some context to suggest their meanings. Park deliberately chooses not to set apart the non-English from the rest of the poem. Meanwhile, the English text includes descriptive neologisms that have been constructed by connecting two words together with a hyphen—as in “copter-scarred sky”—or more deliberately joined by deleting space between them entirely—as in “sweatriver backs,” in her opening poem, “Turtles” (ix-xi). In this way, Park seems to normalize the Korean, while foreignizing the English. By normalizing the marginal and marginalizing the normative, she makes both the Korean and the English appear strange.

Paula Rabinowitz’s discussion of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is useful in thinking through Park’s poetry: “[The] speaker is brought into the fractured spaces of

memory that rearrange conventional punctuation and word spacing extending some words to isolate them, enjambling others to crowd them” (124). Park enacts a similar reorganization of space that alternately isolates and crowds words, readjusting their rhythm and creating new associations. The poem that opens the collection, “Turtles,” presents a range of such examples.

The first lines invite the audience into the narrative that is initially about a couple. However, the second sentence quickly readjusts the narrative to significantly widen the focus from that of the two individuals to an entire country.

This is a story about two people
 searching for a home. No, this is a story
 about a country searching for a home —

The wide geographic and temporal scope of this “search for a home” includes the political and social instability of working-class Koreans in Korea during the Japanese occupation, as well as of recently immigrated Korean Americans again experiencing instabilities, though in a new set of circumstances. The struggle is not only to find a home, but to make one as well, as is evidenced in the various instances of domestic conflict between these two people as well as with their daughter, who is introduced later in the poem.

A few of the English word pairings in “Turtles” are familiar, particularly later in the poem, in such phrasings as the “wire-thin” daughter with her “moth-eaten blanket.” However, most word pairings have been newly joined by Park to evoke specific imagery in her work. For example, in describing the earlier generation of Korean protesters rallying against Japanese occupation, the liberation fighters’ words are portrayed as

“whole as moon-dusted / pears weighing down orchards,” as farmers beat drums, cracking their “throats and sweatrivers backs.” The comparison of the liberation fighters’ words with “moon-dusted pears” ascribes to them a delicate quality. However, as the line continues, these same words are simultaneously ascribed such weight that they would strain the tree limbs of entire orchards. The physical exertion of the liberation fighters’ voicing their protests and the farmers’ drumming is evidenced by their “sweatrivers backs.” This careful juxtaposition highlights the simultaneous burden, vulnerability, and ripe potential that Koreans protesters had experienced during the colonial period.

The two people featured in the beginning of “Turtles” come of age in this tumultuous political environment. The young man grows up in poverty. As a child, he seeks candy and toys left behind by the American GIs. When he grows up, he waits tables at Friendly’s, “sloppy and loose-tongued, the other whiteboy waiters / laughing at his flustered mouth.” The woman, in her youth, “also grew up chasing army trucks / for bubble gum and trinkets, / until she realized some things are not / worth chasing.” As she grows up, she works at a flower factory, picking thorns off roses, “her fingertips scarred and bleeding.” The two participate in the cracking, breaking, and brokenness of that time as they join “with students, rioting and beaten.” The violence of their rioting continues as it pervades their shared domestic life in America.

Kung Jong Lee notes how their personal struggles are exemplified in the form of the poem itself.

The lines [of this poem] are composed of words and phrases only, without any complete sentence[s], to emphasize the fragmentary, deficient, and broken nature of their immigrant lives. Their almost brutally prosaic lives

are also reflected in the staccato use of the punctuation marks. And the repetitive use of “Breaking” highlights their harsh working conditions and violent domestic life eloquently. (45)

The choice of “breaking” over the more commonly used descriptive “broken” is significant. The present progressive tense of “breaking” simultaneously connotes an immediacy and duration that connects the disparate moments of nationalistic protests against Japanese imperialism earlier in Korea’s history, the struggles with the American military in Korea, and the more recent domestic conflicts following the couple’s immigration to the United States. “Breaking” reaches across nations and draws the political and public into the domestic space of the home. Their “[b]reaking bones of mackerel” at the dinner table eventually leads to their physically breaking each other, “[b]ruised rib, / scarred elbow,” and the breaking of their own promises to one another.

Their daughter inherits this pattern of violence, as she experiences personal conflicts with her parents. “Girl grown. / Trying to find home in wild asphalt rhythms, / a bleeding, copter-scarred sky.” The girl’s seeing flying helicopters in America echoes her parents’ memory of America’s military presence in Korea. Eventually, the violence of their home life draws the couple’s daughter out into the world to seek a different home outside of the one she shares with her parents. Her search leads her to an unnamed “him,” a romantic partner who is identified only by masculine pronouns. “He” and the daughter engage in an intense emotionally and physically abusive romantic relationship, and she ultimately tries to leave him. It is at this dramatic point in their relationship that the concepts of the home and the body begin to converge:

He refused to let go of his only home.
 And she began to see: how we cling to fragile walls,
 dilapidated roofs, rib-like planks, knobby floorboards,
 this first home/body pounded and grown out of necessity

As Kung Jong Lee observes, the domestic violence within the daughter's family is replicated in the staccato of commas, periods, and dashes. In contrast, the romantic violence between the daughter and "him" is marked differently with a slash that seems to simultaneously enact a separating and joining of the "home" and "body." Or rather, the slash in "this first home/body" elicits a multiplicity of meanings that lie in the constant transit between the home and the body, while being inclusive of both concepts. This transit is reminiscent of David Palumbo-Liu and Laura Hyun Yi Kang's discussions on the intervening slash in Asian/American.

For decades, there has been considerable attention focused on the different ways in which marginalized American communities have been identified, raising questions ranging from acceptable terminology to the choice of punctuation to represent dual or multiple cultural identities. Beginning in the late 1960s, Americans of Asian descent began distancing themselves from the term "Oriental," preferring the term "Asian American." This had been an important shift, with both cultural and political resonances.¹⁵ Since the general acceptance of "Asian American," for the past several decades, critics have discussed the typographical mark that most fittingly occupies the space between "Asian" and "American." In the larger debate regarding typographical representation of "hyphenated" Americans, some argued for hyphenation, others for just

¹⁵ For more, see Yen Le Espiritu's *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* 32-33.

a space in between, and still others argued for the dropping of the first term to become “simply Americans” (Brody 89).

Part of what makes the choice of punctuation or spacing between “Asian” and “American” challenging is that the first and second terms differ grammatically as well as in scale. Maxine Hong Kingston was among the earliest voices amongst Asian Americans to contribute to this debate when defending the need for a hyphen in “Chinese-American” for both grammatical accuracy and visual effect in a response to critics who had reviewed *The Woman Warrior*.

And lately, I have been thinking that we ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American’, because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, which is impossible in today’s world. Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American. (This idea about the hyphen is my own, and I have not talked to anyone else who has thought of it; therefore, it is a fine point, ‘typical’ of no one but myself.) (“Cultural Mis-readings” 60)

Kingston explores multiple dimensions of this typographical choice, in her consideration of the potential weight of the two terms, the grammatical shifts from noun to adjective, and finally the inaccurate suggestion of the possibility of dual citizenship in China and the United States.

In a more recent study, Jigna Desai further considers the choice of hyphenation in regards to the terms “Asian” and “American” beyond grammatical function, and considers citizenship beyond its legal implications.

The debate of the hyphen is an enduring contention in Asian(-)American studies. ... in nonhyphenated terms, *American* stands for the nation with *Asian* as an adjective indicating a particular formation of the nation.... The hyphen in coupling Asian with American indicates an uneven history and set of power relations in which the mutual constructedness of Asia and America is foregrounded. Questioning the construction of both terms also complicates an idea of what it means to claim membership and citizenship in either. (23)

In associating citizenship with claims to membership in Asia and/or America, Desai's discussion of the terms "Asian" and "American" draws more closely to the questions of "home" raised in "Turtles," which will be further discussed below. Her attention to relations of power is particularly apt in the depictions of individuals' relationships to the nation, as well as that of personal relationships in the poem.

Like Kingston and Desai, Rey Chow considers the effect that the adjectival designation can have for minoritized Americans: "Like Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans, Asians were for a long time categorized by way of the notion of 'problem,' which, as Vine Deloria, Jr. writes, 'relegates minority existence to an adjectival status within the homogeneity of American life'" (*Writing Diaspora* 139). Chow suggests that the adjectival cultural marker "Asian" qualifies the Asian American individual's American-ness. As such, the grammatical function of the adjectives "Hispanic," "African," "Native," and "Asian" functions as a metaphor for the marginalization of culturally minoritized communities in America.

In more recent years, David Palumbo-Liu and Laura Hyun Yi Kang have advocated for the solidus or the slash in “Asian/American” to accommodate a greater potential of what the two terms could represent. In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, Palumbo-Liu considers the implications of the hyphen in “Asian-American” and rejects this choice for his preference for the solidus:

[T]he proximity of Asian Americans to that ideal should be read as a history of persistent reconfigurations and transgressions of the Asian/American “split,” designated here by a solidus that signals those instances in which a liaison between “Asian” and “American,” a *sliding over* between two seemingly separate terms, is constituted. (1)

This discussion suggests how these different choices both physically and symbolically mark the individual’s claim to Asian and/or American identity. In this sense, the solidus, hyphen, or spacing between “Asian” and “American” can read as a signifier of the subject’s relationship to “Asia” and “America.” The larger debate of naming and self-identification understandably concerns issues of representation in social contexts.

In response to David Palumbo-Liu’s stance on the opening of the possibility that the solidus of “Asian/American” allows, Laura Hyun Yi Kang further considers an even greater inclusivity in her discussion of the slash in “Asian/American”: “The intervening slash in Asian/American women is a diacritically awkward shorthand for the cultural, economic, and geopolitical pressures of the continental (Asian), the national (American), and the racial-ethnic (Asian American) as they come to bear on an implicitly more solid gendered ontology (women)” (*Compositional Subjects* 2). In highlighting the “*sliding over* between two seemingly separate terms” as a “dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive

movement,” Palumbo-Liu focuses more heavily on the movement between the two terms and how they implicate each other (1). Kang more clearly emphasizes how the slash allows for the three configurations of the Asian, the American, and the Asian American, with close attention to gendered identity.

To return to Ishle Yi Park’s poem, a strictly parallel alignment of “Asian/American” and “home/body” immediately exposes the critiques that Palumbo-Liu and Kang make in arguing for the *solidus* in “Asian/American.” Too closely associating “Asian” with “home” and “American” with “body” can problematically presume a single linear trajectory from Asia to America, when, in fact, many Asians’ and Asian Americans’ migrations to America are often difficult and fraught, potentially involving multiple legs across various lengths of time, including migrations and reverse migrations.

However, rather than reaffirming this simplistic and inaccurate conception of the Asian/American experience, “Turtles” employs the *solidus* to complicate the too-often presumed one-directional, linear trajectory with a single place and a specific moment of departure with a single destination. This is especially evident when reading the longer descriptive phrase “this first home/body.” The emphasis on its specificity and its firstness seems to mark this particular home as one which various members of the family had sought since leaving colonial Korea. While earlier parts of the poem mention various homes and various bodies, it seems the two concepts of “home” and “body” never quite come together. The colonial occupation distances the young Korean couple from their home country. Following their immigration, neither do they quite find their imagined home in America. While their daughter struggles in her romantic partnership, she and “he” construct—albeit violently and passionately—“this first home/body.”

Further, such associations may simplistically and inaccurately presume that “home” is limited to a single location, that “home” is equivalent to the geographic location in which one resides, and finally presumes the unassimilability of Koreans into American society, all of which evokes Desai’s discussion of claims to membership and citizenship. Following the other potential parallel structures of “Korean/American” and “home/body” leads one to consider the Korean/American’s home to be Korea, while the Korean/American’s body lives in America. This would forward the popular misconception that conflates one’s ethnic/national background with “home” and also suggests a narrative of a perpetual longing for one’s “true” home.

In “Turtles,” rather than conceiving of a home as a space that can be occupied and a body as that which can occupy this space, the home and body become much more intricately intertwined. The title hints toward the home/body of a turtle, whose shell literalizes such a space. For “him,” the young woman’s body itself becomes a familiar and deeply intimate space for him to inhabit. In this sense, his understanding of “home/body” is very particular to his relationship with the young woman. This relationality makes the “home/body” a dynamic space that can be located differently, dependent on a number of factors.

Confronted with his refusal to leave the space of this home/body, the young woman, in turn, considers more generally how one might approach a home/body. Contrary to what her parents may have anticipated, the home/body does not necessarily offer physical or emotional stability. The walls are fragile, the roofs are in disrepair, and the floorboards are uneven and knobby. The physical structure of the home itself is described in terms of human anatomy, which further draws the “home” and “body” closer

together. The “rib-like planks” are strong but slatted, offering support but potentially allowing elements to move in and out of the space they only partially enclose. Just as the human ribs surround the heart, the rib-like planks encircle the home. Both the home and the heart evoke a full range of emotions, which are expressed and received through the structures that can only partially protect them.

The physicality of the “rib-like planks” evokes rows of solidi, or slashes. The planks and punctuation demonstrate limited success in keeping in, or even keeping out, though such strict gate-keeping seems beside the point. Multiplying these rows of planks and punctuation further out beyond the poem, the word “first” in “this first home/body” also suggests a sense that there may be other home/bodies to follow. Thus, while punctuation marks and spacings destabilize and disrupt the text in *Dictee*, in *The Temperature of This Water*, they demonstrate porousness between distinct entities, which results in the ebbing away of clear definitions. Park’s use of punctuation reveals social ruptures, to work toward the possibility of recognition, inclusion, and support—for both the culturally marginalized Koreans in America and the socially marginalized Koreans in South Korea.

“That Thing” Under Erasure in Clay Walls

Like Ishle Yi Park’s *The Temperature of This Water*, Ronyoung Kim opens *Clay Walls* with the struggles of a young couple, Haesu and Chun, newly married, newly immigrated, and trying to make a home in unfamiliar spaces. Both couples immigrate to escape Japanese imperialism, but face American racism upon their respective arrivals to the United States. The experiences of colonization in Korea and racism in America

trouble their concept of a “home,” in their native and adopted countries. Unlike the couple in “Turtles,” however, Haesu and Chun are still strangers to each other upon their arrival in America. Further, they were raised in different social classes in a rigidly stratified Korean society, which further complicates their home life.

Clay Walls is Ronyoung Kim’s fictionalized account of her mother’s experiences growing up in one of the earliest Korean communities in the United States. Set mostly in Los Angeles, *Clay Walls* recounts the intimate relations between Korea, Japan, and America from the 1920s through the 1940s. This time frame is significant, as the novel begins with the early developments of Japan’s occupation of Korea (1910-1945) and the book’s final chapters develop around Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor (1941), the internment of Japanese Americans (1942-1945), and the “liberation” of Korea (1945). The early parts of the novel establish select characters’ Korean nationalism and their demonstrations of anti-Japanese sentiment in the Korean American community, which are challenged and complicated as the novel develops.

As a result of the novel’s continual temporal and geographic shifts, the characters’ understandings of “home” are not only unstable but are produced violently; and they, in turn, produce further violences. A more pronouncedly, unstable concept, continually referred to as “that thing,” conflates the concept of consensual sex and that of rape. The punctuation marks around “that thing” not only visually renegotiate the negative space on the printed page, the phrase “that thing” itself is a negatively defined concept, a term that functions as a substitute for another left unnamed.

The general use of this phrase, “that thing,” and similar phrasings are familiar in American and Korean (and other languages) in a wide range of contexts. However, the

inclusion of these phrases in written text calls attention to the writing-out of something not spoken about explicitly, either with respect for social convention, in response to more forcible restriction, or because of a personal preference. While in most contexts, the primary use of punctuation marks is to distinguish speech in a written text, the quotation marks around “that thing” are significant as they connote words that *cannot be* said.

The punctuation marks framing “that thing” function similarly to the ellipses in *Invisible Man*, as discussed by Jennifer DeVere Brody: “The ellipsis can stand for what *need not be said*, for what may be redundant to say as well as for what *cannot be said*, for that which exceeds locution and is therefore impossible. The ellipses mark the space of difference—where the practically nothing but (im)practically something will be (not) said and (not) written—or ‘said in silence’” (77). For Haesu, “that thing” both *need not* and *cannot be* said. Haesu does not have the vocabulary to articulate her experience of “that thing,” and she demonstrates little interest in seeking out the words to describe it. It is also likely that her identification with the yangban, the Korean elite, prevents her from speaking explicitly about this experience.

Many of Haesu and Chun’s differences are rooted in the distinct ways that each identifies as Korean. For Haesu, her Korean identity is determined by her class privilege, while for Chun, his Korean identity is deeply rooted in his male privilege. Both of their respective understandings of their social roles are based within a traditional, Confucian social structure. However, not only are their understandings of society and their roles within them challenged in their new American surroundings, Haesu and Chun’s assumptions of their respective privilege are at sharp odds with one another. Haesu had been raised within the same patriarchal society that Chun had grown up in, and she

understood the role she would take on as a married woman in a very particular way. She was “a daughter protected from the world by her parents, groomed in seclusion for marriage” (20). She seems to have accepted the privileges and limitations of such a role, though with the understandable assumption that she would marry within her class, and thereby retain her class privilege: “As a young girl, [Haesu] had been hidden from view, required to cover her face whenever she went outside the walls. As her sexuality increased, the greater was her concealment. The higher the woman’s rank, the more she was sequestered, and hers was of the upper class” (104-105). As she had expected to marry within her class, she was devastated when she learned that a prominent American missionary had approached her parents with a marriage proposal on the behalf of Chun Youngjune, the son of a penniless farmer; and that her parents had not tried harder to refuse.

While Haesu had grown up among Korea’s social elite, Chun was the youngest son of a poor farming family. While already living in rural poverty, his being the youngest son left him even more limited financial resources and opportunity than his older siblings. While working his way through college, from a distance Chun falls in love with Haesu, a fellow classmate. In most situations, especially during this time, the vast difference in class between Haesu’s and Chun’s families would have made such a union extremely unlikely. However, at that time, American missionaries had a significant role in Korean society and Haesu’s parents could not imagine refusing Reverend McNeil’s request, even though it went against their social customs. When Reverend McNeil returned with Haesu’s parents’ reply in the affirmative, Chun did not imagine that Haesu had bitterly opposed the union, and in his ignorance of her feelings, assumed that he

would simply take on the traditional role of the husband. Thus, both Haesu and Chun felt their individual Korean identities being challenged by the other, and the concept of “home” was continually redefined in their shared domestic space.

The concept of “home” was also contested even prior to their move to Los Angeles. Soon after Haesu’s parents accept Chun’s marriage proposal on their daughter’s behalf, Chun is mistakenly identified as an anti-Japanese political activist.¹⁶ It becomes urgent that he leave Korea as quickly as possible. As she is engaged to Chun, again against her wishes, Haesu must leave Korea and follow soon after. As the narrative continues, Chun, who had never expressed interest in Korean politics, maintains his apolitical stance. Ironically, it is Haesu—who had been forcibly married to Chun and resultantly compelled to follow him abroad—who takes up a firm stand against Japanese colonialism and actively participates in nationalistic efforts. Once they are settled in Los Angeles, she becomes intimately involved with the local chapter of the National Association of Koreans. “She was the secretary, appointed by Mr. Yim for her ‘skillful use of the Korean language and beautiful handwriting’. Her accounts of the meetings were published in the Korean newspaper” (15). Not only is she able to offer valued service to this organization, she anticipates that her contributions to this international organization’s collective efforts to end Japanese colonization of Korea would allow her to return to Korea, reunite with her family, and reclaim her yangban status. Haesu and Chun’s conflicting understandings of “home” and their differing political positions come to a head following the first narrative’s earliest mention of a National Association of Koreans meeting.

¹⁶ The second chapter includes a fuller discussion of Chun’s escape from colonial Korea, and the contestation of the concept of “home” in relation to the two Korean words “yobo” and “yoboseyo.”

The first reference to “that thing” takes place on the night of the meeting, during which the association hosts Min Chang Mo. Min is a Korean exile who had witnessed his family members and villagers burned to death at the hands of the Japanese police in the aftermath of the March First demonstration.¹⁷ After relating his personal experiences with the Japanese police, “Min went on to say that there were about fourteen thousand military and civilian Japanese police in Korea. He needed more dynamite. He had come to America to collect money for more explosives” (16). At the end of the meeting, Haesu realizes that Chun had not made a contribution towards the Independence movement. She is embarrassed, as her parents had always been able to make such contributions, and furthermore were expected to do so, back in Korea. Before she leaves the meeting, Haesu promises to contribute fifty dollars.

Late that night, Haesu and Chun are both unable to sleep when she confesses that she had pledged a donation to the organization. Chun is upset, as they had already been struggling financially, and also because Haesu had made such a large commitment without consulting him on this decision. When Haesu had made this commitment, she was fully aware of how Chun would feel, and readied herself for his response. However, in light of Chun’s response being even more abrupt than she had expected, she suddenly becomes resolved in her position and defends her decision. This prompts an argument, which turns sexually aggressive on Chun’s part. Chun expresses frustration toward Haesu that she seems oblivious to the change in her economic situation, and also at himself that he is unable to provide for her in the same way she had been cared for by her parents.

¹⁷ The March First or Samil (삼일) Movement took place in 1919 and was arguably the largest and most organized push for Korean independence during the period of Japanese colonialism. The Japanese were surprised and responded quickly with military force. Japanese records show 46,948 arrests, 7,509 killed, and 15,961 injured. For more, see Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea* and Hildi Kang, *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices from Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*.

Their argument stalls. Rather than continue their discussion, Chun forces himself onto her. Haesu protests that others in their shared house may hear them, but he responds that everyone is probably asleep.

She wanted to scream herself free. Instead, she became wooden. Her lack of response only served as a goad, intensifying his determination to arouse her. But the more he tried, the more she wanted to expel him from her. ... She lay there thinking how much she hated it, more each time than the time before. Finally she turned on her side and pulled the covers over her shoulder, asking herself, “Who cares about the money?” (17)

Their next sexual encounter also immediately follows a disagreement about Haesu’s making an annual donation to the National Associations of Koreans, as well as the discovery that Chun has begun gambling. Haesu expresses her disapproval but Chun maintains that as “master of the house,” he would be handling the financial decisions. Their fight concludes when Chun walks out of the house and stays out for three days. On the third night, he wakes Haesu up in bed.

She was awakened by the grip of Chun’s hands around her waist. He turned her on her back and held her firmly as he entered her. Mechanically, he thrust himself in and out until semen seeped from him. He then fell away from her. Without a word, she turned his back to her to go to sleep. ... She did not know the word for what he had done to her. “That thing” is how she referred to coitus. She didn’t know the word for rape. ... Grievances from then on were dated after “what he had done to me.” (30)

That morning, Haesu wakes up to find Chun gone and “on the kitchen counter was a crisp one hundred dollar bill” (30). Not only do quotations enclose the act of violence that Chun had inflicted on her, quotations also mark temporal distance from “that thing,” in noting the time passed since “what he had done to me.”

Neither Chun nor Haesu have the language to describe what had happened between them and they never discuss it. Further, their individual and discreet investments into Korean culture would have kept them from being exposed to this word. Haesu, as part of the yangban class, would not have had to concern herself with this kind of disgrace as her social position would have assured her the protection of her family, friends, and social prestige against such harm. As for Chun, the concept of rape would not have necessarily entered his vocabulary because in his understanding of marriage, wives respect their husbands while husbands care for their wives. In his mind, the authority of the husband assures that he would not need to make requests or demands. Thus, he would never need to forcibly take anything. As Haesu and Chun are among the first generation of this Korean American community, neither of them have parental figures or mentors to direct their differing understandings of marriage.

At the following National Association of Koreans meeting, Haesu brings “the hundred dollar bill Chun had left on the kitchen counter the morning after ‘what he had done to her.’ She planned to donate it towards explosives” (33). While Chun engages in sexual violence to enforce his idea of home (on a domestic scale), Haesu turns this experience to defend her own idea of home (on a national scale) by contributing towards violent resistance against the Japanese military police in Korea.

Such intersecting notions of violence resonate in Jacques Derrida's discussion of scars in *The Monolingualism of the Other*, in which he considers the role of the body in producing language and the marks that are left behind.

While evoking apparently abstract notions of the mark or the re-mark here, we are also thinking of scars. Terror is practiced at the expense of wounds inscribed on the body. We speak of martyrdom and passion in the strict and quasi-etymological sense of these terms. And when we mention the body, we are naming the body of language and writing, as well as what makes them a thing of the body. (27)

He discusses the remark as a second-order mark or as a type of repetition of an originary physical mark, closely drawing connections between the violences inflicted on the body, on or by language. His association of martyrdom with the body of language and writing helps make intelligible the complicated exchanges that Haesu enacts between “that thing,” Chun’s money, and explosives, which are associated respectively with the defense of Haesu’s home and her classed identity, Chun’s home and his gendered identity, and the nation of Korea under Japanese imperialism. All of these concepts are affiliated through the flexible and shifting understanding of “that thing.”

“That thing” is mentioned at later points in the novel too, though as the narrative develops, the contexts shift and involve other characters. Years later, Haesu travels to Korea to visit her family, while Chun stays behind. In her absence, he has a brief affair with another woman, Loretta Lyu. Loretta approaches Chun, and while aware of his married status, she assertively makes the first move, which he does not resist: “As she made love to him, she uttered no words of English. All her utterances were in Korean,

low words of the lower class. Chun had never experienced anything like it. He now knew what Haesu meant when she accused him of raping her. For him, it was ecstatic” (146). In his encounter with “that thing,” Chun disturbingly understands it as the experience of being sexually dominated by another—which for him, in this case, is pleasurable. Thus, he fails to distinguish the difference between his consensual experience with Loretta and his raping Haesu.

Haesu and Chun’s daughter, Faye, also has a confused understanding of “that thing.” However, while Chun’s understanding of Haesu’s experience of “that thing” takes a very specifically problematic turn, Faye’s understanding of this concept remains very general, inclusive of all kinds of sexual experiences. As she grows up, Faye realizes how limited her knowledge of sex is when her friend Bertha announces that she is pregnant. Faye goes to the library to do research. “I read in an hour everything I could about male sperms, female eggs, gestation, and copulation. I learned that ‘sex’ was a legitimate word and what Bertha referred to ‘it’ and Momma called ‘that thing’ was sexual intercourse” (246). Finally, with the guidance of resources from the public library, Faye substitutes the unnamed terms, “that thing” and “it,” with the word “sex.”

With each of Haesu, Chun, and Faye’s evocations of “that thing,” the reference seems to shift and grow larger in scope as the narrative progresses. In addition to the complexity of what “that thing” may allude to, the use of quotation marks also seems to give the term a particular weight. Marjorie Garber discusses how speaking in quotations can lend authority to words, in their being borrowed from the original context (663). In Faye’s case, this question of authority is complicated by the very fact that “it” and “that thing” were never even explicitly named in their original contexts. Theodor Adorno

considers this distance between the quotation and its reference, as he notes: “Quotation marks should be used only when something is quoted and if need be when the text wants to distance itself from a word it is referring to” (94). In keeping these terms in quotation marks, Faye seems to carefully maintain a personal distance from them, suggesting a continued unfamiliarity, confusion, or discomfort with these concepts.

Edward Said seems to elaborate on Adorno’s thoughts on quotations as a means to establish distance.

Quotation is a constant reminder that writing is a form of displacement. As a rhetorical device, quotation can serve to accommodate, to incorporate, to falsify (when wrongly or even rightly paraphrased), to accumulate, to defend, or to conquer—but always, even when in the form of a passing allusion, it is a reminder that other writing serves to displace present writing.” (22)

Faye enacts a displacement of these words as she quotes others—Bertha and her mother—who have substituted the words “sex” and “rape” for unnamed and undefined terms, remaining merely suggestive of the specific acts they had each experienced. Because of this lack of specificity in Bertha and Haesu’s articulations, Faye draws closer to a more clinical—and therefore, less personal or individualized—understanding of sexual intercourse. Bertha’s recent announcement of her pregnancy prompts Faye to associate “sex” with conception—the result of, rather than the act of, sexual intercourse. In fact, the addition of Bertha’s discussion of “it” moves Faye further away from her mother’s understanding of “that thing.”

Notably, her research materials and the terms “sex” and “sexual intercourse” are all in the English language. Neither of her parents finds the words to more explicitly speak of “that thing,” even in Korean, their stronger language. Not even Bertha, for whom English is more comfortable, elaborates on “it” in English. It is notable that both Haesu and Chun falter with language when it comes to “that thing,” considering that they each demonstrate a sustained interest and investment in language in other areas of their lives. In fact, as the secretary of the National Association of Koreans, Haesu has been recognized for her facility with language. As mentioned above, she was “appointed by Mr. Yim for her ‘skillful use of the Korean language and beautiful handwriting.’ Her accounts of the meetings were published in the Korean newspaper” (15). It is perhaps her skill and public recognition of this skill that further creates distance between Haesu and Chun. She thinks deeply and tries to make sense of the continually confusing set of situations in which she finds herself and her family, with respect to both colonial repression in Korea and the discrimination they face in America. She tries to discuss some of these thoughts with Chun, but he dismisses her concerns, largely as he feels insecure about his inability to shield his family from these larger social forces.

[Haesu] had plenty to say about ignorance, prejudice, and discrimination.

But Chun was right, it would be wasted on him. To whom then, she wondered. All her thoughts were formed in her native language. In English, she could only utter one or two isolated words, using her hands when words failed here, exasperated that she appeared mentally deficient.

(22-23)

In such instances, the movements of her hands seem to physically function as quotation marks, denoting the points in which her Korean does not quite meet her more limited English fluency, the space in which she is not yet able to provide her own translations for her thoughts.

Earlier in his college years, Chun, too, had thought deeply about the workings of language during his study of English, and he also considered how he might use his native Korean to describe his new experiences to his parents:

He tried to make his experiences away from home sound interesting, search for words that would transport his parents into a world rich with imagination and fascination information. . . . “It is truly amazing. They talk about everything. I don’t know where they find the words. The weather, their feelings, their thoughts, everything. They put everything into words. I’m slowly learning their language, but I’ll never be able to use it the way they do.” . . . Pictures revealed a world beyond his imagination, but the words were baffling. (151)

Similar to Chun’s own dismissal of Haesu’s attempts to draw him into conversation, in this earlier instance, Chun’s father dismisses Chun’s excitement about his thoughts on language: “*Aboji* picked up his pipe. ‘They have their language and we have ours. You’d better spend more time on your studies’” (151).

Throughout his college years, unlike Haesu, who is comfortably able to focus just on her studies, Chun works while attending school to pay for his tuition. Chun generally has a positive relationship with his employer, Reverend McNeil, as is evidenced by the reverend’s willingness to facilitate his marriage proposal to Haesu, as well as the

reverend's role in helping Chun escape when he is sought after by the Japanese authorities. However, at one point, during his employment, Chun is caught in Reverend McNeil's private library, sitting behind his desk, reclining in his chair and imagining himself in a position of authority.

Running his hands over the upholstered arms, [Chun] thought about how he would describe the feeling he experienced to his parents. Words like 'royal' and 'authority' came to his mind. . . . He became so engrossed that he did not hear Reverend McNeil enter. . . . Chun would never be able to describe the rage on the Reverend's face nor would he be able to repeat his words. The Reverend yanked Chun from the chair, led him to the courtyard, broke off a twig from the plum tree and, still shoeless, gave Chun a switching, the first Chun had received in his life.

He never told his parents of the incident. (152)

For the first and only time in the narrative, Reverend McNeil inflicts physical violence on Chun. Immediately before Reverend McNeil had entered the library, Chun had been attempting to fix his experience of imagined authority with words, further substantiating the interest in language he shares with Haesu. The switching he receives upon discovery marks a turn in which Chun seems to stop thinking about the workings of language and also stops his careful selection of vocabulary to describe his lived experiences. Instead, Chun becomes reticent in his thoughts, speech, and actions.

In fact, his subsequent inability to articulate the Reverend's intense emotional response or to even repeat his words resonates with Haesu's own response to the sexual violence that Chun inflicts on her. While this incident with Reverend McNeil occurs

earlier in Chun's life, it is introduced much later in *Clay Walls*, even after his affair with Loretta is disclosed (to the reader, but not to Haesu). This painful and emasculating incident would most closely align with Haesu's experience of "that thing." However, Chun never makes an explicit association between his switching and Haesu's rape. Whether consciously or not, in *not* making this association, he enacts a similar distancing from his whipping that Haesu does from "that thing" throughout the remainder of the narrative.

In *Clay Walls*, "that thing" serves as just one example of many that demonstrate cultural and linguistic complexities. While some critics have also noted such complex plays with language in the narrative, many others, have argued the exact opposite, in commenting on how "easy" they found the language in the work. Seiwoong Oh explains the latter and speaks to these divergent responses:

The author [Kim Ronyoung], who seems aware of her position as a multicultural writer, has chosen to make "things easy" for an audience outside her culture by offering both lexical and contextual clues to her other ethnic material. She glosses all Korean words in her text. ... Despite such textual accessibility, reviewers of the novel are divided into two distinct groups: one that comprehends most aspects of the novel and one that does not. (5, 6)

One commonality shared by both of these opposing critical responses, as well as by select examples of the positive reviews and perhaps by the novel itself, is the overemphasized expectation for language to function as a representational medium. To further emphasize this point, Oh quotes from Maxine Hong Kingston's *Trip Master Monkey*, "People who

call us inscrutable get their brains sewn shut. Then they run around saying, ‘We don’t know you. And it’s your fault. You’re inscrutable.’ They willingly don’t learn us, and blame that on us, that we have an essential unknowableness” (12). In Jigna Desai’s study of South Asian diasporic film, she cites other scholars and film directors who have also responded to the “representative politics that were expected of them. [Kobena] Mercer (1994) calls this expectation ‘the burden of representation,’ while [Hanif] Kureishi labels it the ‘brown man’s burden’ (Kureishi 1995, 6)” (58). The study of punctuation is just one way in which to identify and challenge such expectations of accessibility and representation, particularly in the reading of Asian American literature, or other texts that may be less familiar to mainstream American audiences. In fact, the spaces that punctuation marks and spacings occupy, and sometimes even push further out, help reveal the breaks and fissures lying just beneath these expectations.

Negatives Frames

As “home” is defined *against* other concepts framing unequal relations of power, “that thing,” “it,” and other such unnamed violences are similarly defined against what can be positively articulated. Faced with the Japanese imperial government’s threats to their claim to Korea and in early encounters with racism in the United States, the concept of “Koreanness” is a troubled one for characters in all three texts. As Kandice Chuh notes in her reading of *Clay Walls*:

Confined to the period of colonial Korea (officially 1910-1945), Kim’s *Clay Walls* maps a field in which Korean/Korean American subject formation is largely wrought *against* Japanese colonialism and *in reaction*

to the heightened racist nativism in the United States during that era. ... In this novel, Koreanness is defined only through negation: whatever it is, it has no substance, no immanent presence. (*Imagine Otherwise* 90, 96)

In the seeming impossibility of defining “Koreanness” through positive assertion, this concept is negatively defined by outlining that which it is *not*, depicted in *contrast* against other more concretely defined concepts, further demonstrating the imbalanced relations of power between Korea, Japan, and the United States. This lack of clear and fixed definition of “Koreanness” opens it up to be constantly redefined as the Korean/Korean American subject moves to different spaces and participates in different communities.

Dictee, *The Temperature of This Water*, and *Clay Walls* each demonstrates that language reveals complex power relations not only in its content, but even more powerfully—and, in these instances, quite deliberately—in its form, and particularly in the overlooked spaces of punctuation marks and spacings. These three texts also attend to the tensions between modes of communication, in spoken and written form, and in multilingual contexts.

For through their logical-semantic autonomy, punctuation marks, which articulate language and thereby bring writing close to the voice, have become separate from both voice and writing, and they come into conflict with their own mimetic nature. An ascetic use of punctuation marks attempts to compensate for some of that. In every punctuation mark thoughtfully avoided, writing pays homage to the sound it suppresses. (Adorno 9)

Punctuation and spacings produce a multiplicity of meanings beyond what words alone may suggest. In these particular texts, the various ways in which punctuation marks can be contextualized in Korean and American history and literature contributes to the significance of these visual, textual markers. “History has left its residue in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation” (Adorno 92). In the end, it is not only our close reading of punctuation marks that can give life to printed texts, but the residue of history in punctuation marks themselves that looks back out at us.

Chapter Two: Asian/American Subjects Absent, Abject, and in Linguistic Transit

Translations are often popularly discussed in terms of binary constructions, regarded in terms of “success” and “failure.” This binary further presumes a linear trajectory that goes in just one direction from the first language to the target language, and further from a single author, to be received by a single homogenous audience, disregarding the role of the translator in the process. As Lawrence Venuti notes,

The translator’s invisibility is also partly determined by the individualistic conception of authorship that continues to prevail in Anglo-American culture. According to this conception, the author freely expresses his thoughts and feelings in writing, which is thus viewed as an original and transparent self-representation, unmediated by transindividual determinants (linguistic, cultural, social) that might complicate authorial originality. (6)

This inadvertently results in an erasure of the labor that goes into producing a translation. The work of the translator, the hybrid spaces of multilinguality, and the circuitous routes that the work of translation can take are often overlooked. Of course, many readers do realize that there are multiple relays between distinct languages, voices, and references that necessarily inform the complex work of translation. But even informed readers may occasionally slip into relying on these more simplistic, dualistic frames.

Naoki Sakai offers a useful model to work through these concerns in his discussion of the translator as “a subject in transit.” According to Sakai, as the presence of the translator “disrupts” the conventional relationship between author and audience, the translator “must be internally split and multiple,” which, in turn, “reflects in a certain

way the split between the addresser—or the addressee, and furthermore the split within the addresser and the addressee themselves—and the translator demonstrates the way in which the subject constitutes itself” (13-14).

The multiplicity of the subject, and particularly the articulation of this multiplicity, makes apparent how language exceeds the subject. In each of the central texts discussed in this chapter, translation—and, in some cases, the deliberate lack of translation—complicates the speakers’ address and the construction of the characters as subjects. However, it is due less to the “failure” of language but that language can be shown to *exceed* the subject, the character, or the narrative. As Judith Butler notes: “[T]he subject has its own existence implicated in a language that precedes and exceeds the subject, a language whose historicity includes a past and future that exceeds that of the subject who speaks. And yet, this “excess” is what makes possible the speech of the subject” (28). I appreciate Butler’s use of the term “excess” here, as it frames this discussion in positive terms. It is difficult to find even near-universal consensus on “good translations,” and as a result, much popular, and even critical, discourse on translation is framed in negative terms.¹⁸ Thus the concept of “excess” helps shift the framing of translation from such terms as loss, lack, or failure to that of excess, opportunity, and potential.

In order to explain the excesses of language(s) in *Dictée*, *Clay Walls*, and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, I offer here a brief overview of how grammatical subjects and speaker-addressee relationships are constructed in Korean. Unlike the many European languages that follow the subject-predicate structure, the Korean language follows the topic-comment grammatical structure. Some linguists, such as Ho-Min Sohn,

¹⁸ I elaborate on this in the following chapter, particularly in relation to subtitling.

further characterize Korean as a situation- or discourse-oriented language. Thus, when Korean is translated into a language supported by the subject-predicate structure, the grammatical subject is often approximated. Sohn explains:

Omission of situationally or contextually understood elements is a widespread phenomenon in Korean to the extent that Korean may be called a situation or discourse oriented language. This is particularly true with noun phrases in various grammatical cases, the most frequent ones being the subject referring to the speaker in declarative sentences and to the hearer in interrogative sentences. (*The Korean Language* 291)

The grammatical subject is often absent (and is usually easily inferred) in *spoken* communication. This is especially true when the grammatical subject is understood to be either the speaker or the listener in a given conversation. Sohn further explains the social contexts in which the subject can be understood, relationally between the participants of the conversation:

While there is little power distinction in Western languages such as English, Korean sentences can hardly be uttered without the speaker's proper knowledge of his or her social relationship with the addressee and referent in terms of age category, social status, kinship, and in- and out-groupness. The intricate social stratification between the speaker and addressee and between the speaker and third-person human referents are encoded in the linguistic structure of the language. (*Korean Language in Culture and Society* 8).

In *Clay Walls*, the inferred subjects are understood but not explicitly identified in conversations throughout the work. In *Dictee*, and particularly in my reading of the frontispiece, the subject is inferred—though much less coherently—by the author(s) of a wall carving whose inscribed words evoke speech much more so than it does written language. In some of these instances—and particularly in the case of *Dictee*'s frontispiece—the transcription of these spoken words onto a printed page makes the subject more difficult to identify, and the translation across languages presents further complications.

Sohn speaks to these challenges in translating between Korean and (American) English, with particular attention to the first-person singular pronoun, “I”:

The extensive and obligatory use of “I” in English and the extensive omission of “I” in Korean suggest that *I* exists independently of others in American but is not outstanding in Korean communication. Koreans usually use a plural possessive form (neutral *uri* or humble *chǒhǔi* ‘our’), where English speakers would use a singular form (my), as in *uri nara* ‘our country’ vs. ‘my country;’ *chǒhǔi chip* ‘our house’ vs. ‘my house’ *uri tongsaeng* ‘our younger sibling’ vs. ‘my younger sibling.’

(*Korean Language in Culture and Society* 10)

In this discussion, Sohn usefully points out the ways in which the individual subject is deferred, either to an unspecified, inferred subject or to a collective subject. He also notes the “neutral” and “humble” forms that the speaker can use.

The noted differentiation of such forms may be familiar to speakers of Romance languages, and specifically in terms of the distinctions between formal and informal verb

endings. However, in contrast to the two endings indicating formal or informal address in such languages as French or Spanish, the Korean language has at least six distinct speech-level endings, all of which change depending on whether the sentence is meant to be declarative, interrogative, imperative, or propositive. Jae Jung Song identifies these six speech-level endings as plain, intimate, familiar, semi-formal, polite, and deferential, increasing in formality and demonstration of respect (124). “Which of the six speech levels is to be used depends on who is speaking to whom (and also, more frequently than not, in the presence of whom)” (123). The relationships between speakers may be determined by age, gender, family relation, profession, personal familiarity, or other aspects of one’s social identity. These relationships may potentially change, not just over a period of time, but even within a single conversation. As the speakers change topics or contexts, or as the composition of the participants involved in a conversation change, their social relations may shift accordingly. For instance, I tend to take on a more deferential tone when speaking to my mother in the presence of others, especially when speaking to her in front of elder members of my extended family. However, I speak informally to her when it is just the two of us. This can be a source of confusion even for fluent speakers, as using the most appropriate speech level depends on correctly understanding one’s relationship to all of the participants in a given conversation.

Of course the (mis)translations from Korean into English of inferred grammatical subjects can be influenced by the ways in which Korean and Korean American subjects are perceived. Elaine H. Kim approaches the question of who gets to speak, and who speaks for whom, with a specific focus on those who had been marginalized within Korean society during the tumultuous aftermath of the Korean War:

What most Americans know about Korea has been told from the point of view of a U.S. military member or a missionary, about prostitutes, beggars, and orphans, many of them mixed race children, *never speaking but always spoken for and about*, souls being saved by the civilizing missions of neocolonialism and evangelism. No doubt they would have found it difficult to imagine that one day the voice of the native, having returned to the imperial center, might speak back—in English—from its very different positionality. (“Myth, Memory, and Desire” 80)
(italics mine)

Without fixing single definitive translations for the unarticulated subjects presented in *Dictee*, *Clay Walls*, and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, this chapter considers the many potential voices and meanings that emerge when re-focusing attention on the Korean speaking voice.

Not all of the Korean in *Dictee*, *Clay Walls*, and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* is translated, which draws attention to the state of “untranslatability” and the state of being untranslated, which comprise two distinct and very different situations. Naoki Sakai notes: “What is translated and transferred can be recognized as such only after translation. The translatable and untranslatable are both posterior to translation as *repetition*. Untranslatability does not exist before translation: translation is the a priori of the untranslatable” (5). Translation precedes the untranslatable or even the untranslated. Even in—or perhaps especially in—untranslated texts, translation is always already present.

The Absent Subject in *Dictée*'s Frontispiece

While many narratives traditionally begin with the identification and contextualization of principle characters, places, or themes, *Dictée* unsettlingly opens with a series of *dissociations*, making for a disorienting entry into this work. The following reading focuses on the dissociations beginning with the often-overlooked frontispiece that precedes even the title page.

The frontispiece of *Dictée* depicts a photograph of Korean characters crudely etched into a wall. The text has been popularly translated as “Mother. I miss you. I am hungry. I want to go home.”¹⁹ This photograph was taken from inside a tunnel in Nagano Prefecture, Matsushiro City, Japan. This tunnel had been used during the construction of the Japanese imperial palace (Kang, “The ‘Liberatory Voice’” 99). The anonymous writer of this message was originally presumed to have been a Korean male conscripted laborer. The inscriptions having been written in Korean is significant, as during the colonial period, Koreans were discouraged from using the Korean language for either official or even unofficial purposes. By 1938, the “Korean language [was] abolished in all public schools [and the] Japanese language [was] required for all public functions, including the securing of ration cards and public certification” (Kang, *Under the Black Umbrella* 154). In brief, the writing in this photograph is understood to have been inscribed underground by a conscripted Korean laborer, relocated overseas to Japan, during the Japanese colonial period, at a time when the use of the Korean language was prohibited. Each of these conditions on its own would be disenfranchising. The combined

¹⁹ As in Josephine Nock-Hee Park’s “‘What of the Partition’: *Dictée*’s Boundaries and the American Epic,” 226; This version is the only translation I have seen in all other critical texts that I have consulted.

physical, geographical, political, and linguistic subjections imposed on the laborer would put him in an extremely vulnerable position.

Little is known of the author of this inscription. The presumption of a close correlation between the author of the physical carvings and the speaker of the text calling for his mother would suggest an autobiographical or epistolary tone. However, this seemingly intimate, albeit anonymous, communication could have been authored by any of the 800,000 Korean laborers who had been conscripted to Japan during this period. This is a moderate estimate—other scholars argue that there were as many as two million men who had been conscripted during the colonial period.²⁰ Later, scholars have suggested an entirely different hypothesis, that the writer may have been an activist working to call attention to the forced labor of Koreans during the colonial period. The carvings may have been done after the end of the colonial period, which would potentially allow for a broader temporal range within which to date this text. This also expands the intended recipient of this message beyond the literal call for one’s mother to larger audiences who may be unfamiliar with this aspect of Korean and Japanese history. Of course, this inscription could have been written by multiple authors. Whether any of the laborers can claim authorship of this text, its existence recalls the physical, political, and linguistic subjugation of these laborers who had once occupied the space of the text’s inscription.

The photograph captures four lines of text carved into a stone wall. In my very literal translation, the lines read: “Mother. Miss [her]. Hungry. Want to go home.”

(어머니 보고싶다 배가고파요 고향에 가고싶다) In contrast, all of the published

²⁰ See chart from Yamada Shoji on p. 95 of Paul H. Kratoska’s *Asian Labor in the Wartime Japanese Empire: Unknown Histories* and p. 247 of Victor D. Cha’s *Alignment Despite Antagonism: the United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle*.

English-language translations of the frontispiece in *Dictée* include three instances of the word “I.” Further, much of the scholarship around Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée* seems to argue for a first person singular “I,” for a fractured self, or for a set multiplicity of subjects. However, there has been little critical attention to the actual Korean characters in the text that inspire these discussions.

Central to this examination is, first, the question of eliciting a grammatical subject in the work of translation from Korean to English and, second, its social, political, and cultural implications of the “I,” the self, and the subject in this multiply hybrid text. As Timothy Yu notes, “Establishing the subject of *Dictée*—both who speaks it and what it is about—has been the starting point for nearly all readings of the book and is the key to struggles over its classification” (122). My particular interventions are that the establishing of subject begins much earlier in the text than most critics have acknowledged, and that centralizing grammar and translation can contribute new readings of *Dictée*. Timothy Yu’s discussion is among the more recent examples of *Dictée* criticism that speak to these concerns: “The subject Cha evokes in these sections is better understood in terms of “receiver” and “sender” than in national or racial terms” (Yu 136). The reframing of the subject in these terms works well with my own reading of the speaker(s) and audience(s) implied in the frontispiece, especially when considering the continually shifting speech-level endings throughout the photographed inscription in the frontispiece. Thus, the audience(s) to whom the text may have been addressed remains unclear.

After the initial call for “Mother” in the wall carving, the following three sentences shift from the semi-formal to the polite ending, and then back to the plain

ending, suggesting the possibility for two or more intended addressees. The second and fourth sentences (“Miss [her].” and “Want to go home.”) read as statements intended for a general audience that likely includes one or more peers. The polite ending takes a notably more deferential and respectful tone. Sakai’s discussion of a translator’s address to a heterogeneous audience is useful to remember here, as this inscription not only seems to address a heterogeneous *audience*, but it also opens up the possibility of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of *speakers*.

The word choice in this short text illuminates different aspects of the speaker’s own corporality and his relationships to others from whom he is separated. The phrase “want to see” is a literal translation of the idiomatic expression for *missing* someone, and most translations would likely favor this interpretation. However, I am drawn to the repetition of the sound of the word-ending “shipda” (싶다, the Korean verb ending for “to want to”) in the second and fourth lines. Also, the desire to physically see (with one’s eyes) and the desire for food (in one’s stomach) noted in the second and third lines each alludes to the physical body of the imagined speaker—and potentially that of the conscripted worker, or the author, who may or may not be the same.

While the middle two lines look inward toward the physical body of the speaker, the first and final lines look outward, constructing the subject in relation to the speaker’s relationships with others—firstly in terms of family, and then in terms of geography. “Eo-meo-ni” (어머니) is a formal and respectful title for one’s mother, which may be used in formal events, special ceremonies, or other significant moments. In most situations, the more informal title “eom-ma” is used to call to or speak about one’s mother (and this is the case across all ages from young children to older adults). The

calling of “eo-meo-ni” in this text suggests that the speaker finds him or herself in extraordinary circumstances.

The word “ko-hyang” (고향) can be translated as “home,” “hometown,” or “country of birth,” and is usually evoked when one is physically away from one’s kohyang. Of course, the notion of distance is quite relative. Further, the question “Where is your kohyang?”—which is commonly asked in polite conversation—would be understood differently depending on one’s nationality. In more casual conversations among Koreans living in Korea, “kohyang” would likely refer to one’s hometown. In a conversation involving people of different nationalities, “kohyang” would refer to one’s country of origin. Thus, in conversations involving just Koreans, “kohyang” evokes nostalgia, evidenced especially in many familiar Korean folk songs about one’s “kohyang.” However, while in a more international context, “kohyang” is discussed in more impersonal terms, with some expectation that at least one of those involved in the conversation is presently away from his country of birth. In the wall carving, “kohyang” seems to evoke elements of both of these usages. While remembering his “kohyang” from abroad, there is a nostalgic tone in the author’s missing his childhood home. The call to “eo-meo-ni” further makes the “kohyang” a place of personal significance.

The personal details that these statements evoke are complicated by the absence of a definitive grammatical subject in the Korean text. In the popularly cited translation of the frontispiece, a stable and definitive grammatical subject is actually invented. As often happens in informal spoken Korean, both the subject and possessive pronouns are dropped from the short sentences and can be inferred by the context of the rest of the conversation. In many instances, the absent subject of the spoken sentence can be

attributed to the speaker, as has been the case with the presumed speaker in the frontispiece as suggested by the English translation. However, some of the multiplicities suggested above would be erased in the presumption of a definitive first person singular adult subject.

Given this “instability and unsettledness of subject positions” in *Dictée*—an instability present even in *Dictée*’s shifting use of grammatical persons—[Shelley Sunn] Wong notes that reading Cha raises the paradoxical possibility that “if there is a foundational moment for minority discourse, it is to be located ... within the anti-foundational moment and space of diction” (Yu 118).

This seeming absence—or inferred presence—of the speaking subject resonates with the challenges that both immigrants in America, as well as Korean citizens under Japanese colonialism had faced in claiming subjecthood and gaining visibility in their respective societies. While not directly addressing the missing “I” in the Korean text, other *Dictée* scholars have called attention to the parallels between marginalization, colonization, and other structures of discrimination. For instance, Laura Hyun Yi Kang notes that: “Such unnatural constructedness of language and literature is muted by the implicit and explicit hierarchies of differentially authorized speaking or writing positions, which often support differential social valuations along the axes of ethnicity, class, and gender” (*Compositional Subjects* 222).

Another prominent critic, Anne An-lin Cheng, considers the instability of the presumed “I” in the carving: [I]dentity, as such, is not susceptible to identification; *it does not identify itself* ... Since the ‘I’ can only exist, rigorously speaking, as an unconscious

certitude, it can only enjoy itself through a detour—a detour that is afforded by mimesis: ‘I am another, the other who gives me my identity’” (161). The “I” is continually deferred in its inability or refusal to identify itself, certainly in the process of writing, as well as in the act of translation. More specifically, Cheng asks: “How do we read its political intention when we can hardly locate a political subject? How do we construct a political subject when that “subject’s” very voice, *along with its boundaries*, is always in oscillation?” (141-2). I would rephrase this question slightly to inquire as to what can be gained in *not* stabilizing or individualizing this seemingly indeterminate, multiple subject(s).

Eun Kyung Min reads the potential multiplicity of the first person singular “I” in her critical response to other sections of *Dictée* as related to history and genre: “The instability and fracturing of voices in *Dictée*, the constant slippage between the first, second, and third persons, the unnamings of the ‘I,’ can thus be interpreted as transcribing an experience of the self as fragmentary with regard to both individual and collective pasts, as locating the instability of autobiography” (317). The first, second, and third persons in *Dictée* in its English and French language portions are underscored by the slippage between subject and object—each of which can also remain unnamed and inferred—in its Korean language portions: “Mother. [I/we] want to see [her/you/them]. [I/We] are hungry. [I/we] want to go back to [my/our] hometown.” As Min suggests, “the unnamings of the ‘I’” effectively destabilizes temporal fixity, making possible multiple and, at times simultaneous, historical perspectives of single or multiple persons, potentially across a range of ages. This obviously complicates the reading of particular sections of *Dictée* that have been often attributed to be autobiographical. Presuming

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha to be the first person singular “I” presented throughout *Dictee* would be as misleadingly simplistic and inaccurate as ascribing the unarticulated “I” of the wall carvings to an individual Korean laborer at a specific historical moment.

Such shifts, oscillations, inventions, and omissions certainly make it difficult to construct a stable reading of the Korean text. Arguably, the objective need not be to determine a single translation. Rather, as Eun Kyung Min argues, the frontispiece should be read precisely for its illegibility, or untranslatability. In fact, she calls the work that the frontispiece enacts an “anti-dictée,” that obstructs the reader’s entry into the text:

Untranslated, unexplained, unsigned, the frontispiece represents, particularly for readers uneducated in Korean language and history, a visible but unreadable text, a cluster of hieroglyphs, mere pictorial signs. . . . It also performs as an anti-dictée: written during a time when the Japanese had forcibly outlawed the Korean language, it does not transcribe the spoken, foreign, and mandatory tongue but rather writes the unspeakable, forbidden mother tongue—in the enemy’s land. (313)

This carving opens *Dictee* with a directly subversive act of linguistic disobedience that focuses the reader and viewer on the question of untranslatability, which is revisited throughout the remainder of the text.

As Shelly Sunn Wong observes, the only instance of pure Korean writing in *Dictee* is found in the frontispiece. Here she discusses the relationship of the frontispiece to the larger work of *Dictee* itself.

It is useful to recall here the traditional function of the frontispiece—it is an illustration which precedes the title page and which functions to

provide entry into the text. But the Korean inscription, reading as it does, vertically and from right to left, ending at the extreme left margin, effectively disables that traditional function. Instead of leading the reader into the work, the directional movement of the frontispiece begins to usher the reader back out of the text. (107)

Wong's reading of the frontispiece as deferring or obstructing entry into the work, in part, presumes a certain level of literacy—in recognizing that the words proceed vertically, and from right to left—and perhaps even the ability to recognize that the inscription had been written in the Korean language. Wong observes that the words perform an erasure of the Korean language out of the larger work of *Dictee* itself. In fact, after English, the second most prominent language in *Dictee* is French. There are traces of Korean in hanja and in Romanized form, as well as in the translated excerpts of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's mother's journal entries. However, in each of these instances, the Korean language is evidenced in translation, in deferred and obstructed form.

Having examined the absent subject in the frontispiece, I can then offer greater insight into other examples from Cha's work that further explore these concerns. I begin by revisiting the dictation exercise. Many critics have attended to the formal qualities of this exercise, but few have examined the content of the text that the student herself is writing. Laura Hyun Yi Kang notes that the dictation is about a "traveling female subject ... [who demonstrates] the difficulty of expression and communication in a new environment as she cannot answer a seemingly innocuous query—"How was the first day?" (Compositional Subjects 220). Kang reads in the traveler an inability, unwillingness, or discomfort to offer a direct response to the question, avoiding the first

person singular pronoun in her replies. “The interrogators' expectations of a first-person telling are foiled by the striking absence of an ‘I’ in the response. Instead, the response is cast as a generic third-person statement, as if referring to some other (ungendered) traveler” (*Compositional Subjects* 221).

Dictee opens with an avoidance of the use of the first person singular pronoun, in the Korean, French, and English languages. The text continues to avoid or defer the use of the “I” in later sections, as well. In *The Monolingualism of the Other*, Jacques Derrida considers the impossible position of the speaking subject in terms of the “I” and the concept of “a mother tongue.” In this text, the speaker claims: “*Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine*” (2). In continually displacing a linguistic center or origin, Derrida argues that such a statement makes all languages foreign, though not equally so. “It is necessary to know already in what language *I* is expressed, and *I am* expressed. Here we are thinking of the *I think*, as well as the grammatical or linguistic *I*, of the *me* [*moi*] or *us* [*nous*] in their identificatory status as it is sculpted by cultural, symbolic, and sociocultural figures” (28-29). Alternately stressing between the subject and verb, and between the grammatical and the linguistic, Derrida considers the politics of foreignizing the “I,” as well as the potentially different degrees of foreignness (or distance from the imagined center) of various languages.

Naoki Sakai raises a similar concern regarding the presumption of origin in his discussion of *Dictee*: “[Cha’s] lack of a mother tongue presents itself as an obstacle, opacity to the desired transparency of communication in which the body is supposed to disappear completely” (30). In this concise observation, Sakai makes several critical points about *Dictee*. He immediately challenges the assumption that the artist has a single

originary language, a mother tongue. This is not to level all of Cha's languages to the same plane, but rather to disrupt the centralization of any one given language in the text. Further, while language generally engages the oral, aural, and visual senses, Sakai proposes that the tactility of the physical body *obstructs* "the desired transparency of communication in which the body is supposed to disappear completely." In *Dictee*, the body both produces and is produced by language, even while it itself obstructs or complications this very production.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's attention to the ways that bodies are used, offered, or dismissed as obstruction resonates throughout *Dictee*—in the act of taking communion; in the drawing of blood; in diagrams of vocal organs; the dispersal of a student protest; and the martyrdom of Joan of Arc, to cite just a few examples (13, 64, 74, 82, 117). The persistent reminder of the body's physicality is also evident in her film and video work. As Timothy Yu states, "Cha's art of the 1970s displays her deep engagement with language itself. Personal and historical relationships become, in her work, linguistic ones; persons become understood as positions within language" (106). Language and visual form do not stand merely as metaphors in her work across media and genres, but Cha uses these disparate elements to construct her own grammar with which to explore these concerns in her many projects.

In a critical study of Asian American visual art, Elaine Kim cites Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's own reflections on language. Cha has written that she was "looking at the roots of language before it is born on the tip of the tongue," at what was not said and not seen. Cha was interested in language as someone who had been

forced to learn languages more ‘consciously’ at a later age. ... Certain arenas that continue to hold interest for me are: grammatical structures of a language, syntax. How words and meaning are *constructed* in the language system itself, by function or usage, and how transformation is brought about through manipulation, process as changing the syntax, isolation, removing from context, repetition, and reduction to minimal units. (“Interstitial Subjects” 48-49)

Not content with simply writing or filming works that explore the complex workings of language(s) in their content, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha manipulates the compositions of text and of film to further explore these complexities. Her attention to the formal qualities of her compositions importantly includes omissions, absences, and deletions, which comprise often some of the richest moments in her work.

Cha concludes the “Clio/History” section of *Dictee* with a draft of her own messily handwritten notes that are reproduced across two pages (verso-recto) on unlined paper (40-41). The notes are presented as an earlier draft of a cleanly typed paragraph included in the two pages that precede the handwritten text. An original draft of these handwritten notes is included in the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha archive at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, and corresponds to her other handwritten notes. This observation is not to attribute a particular sense of “authenticity” or “authority” to this section of *Dictee*, but rather to reaffirm Cha’s attention to the deliberately constructed nature of her work. The handwritten and the typed sections begin with the same statements, but quickly begin to diverge. Most of the middle section of the handwritten notes have been crossed out in a variety of ways including strikethroughs, a large X

across four consecutive lines of text, and messy scribbles over individual words. Carets and lines indicate word insertions and two lines of text are inexplicably bracketed off. The content of the sentences in the final five lines seem to resonate in various other sections of *Dictee*, but are not reproduced verbatim anywhere. Like the absent subject in the opening pages of *Dictee*, these notes highlight the significance of concepts that are made even more notable in their absence or erasure. They compel the reader to both see and not see at the same time, challenging the reader to contextualize these absences in the larger context of *Dictee*, and perhaps in other texts and in other histories.

The Object Subject on the Theater Stage

Like *Dictee*, Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven: A Show About White People in Love* challenges the audience to make sense of unconventionally constructed subjects. The play highlights individual visual and aural components that inform how the subjecthood of individual characters may be recognized—by each other, and also by the audience—to varying levels of success. These components build gradually, beginning with a soundtrack played in a dark theater, soon after which an accompanying video is screened. After the short screening, the stage lights come on, illuminating a single character who begins to deliver a monologue, standing in the middle of an empty stage. The isolation of these various components draws attention to the way in which the play constructs its own vocabulary of sounds, movements, and costumes. This particular set of references helps the audience to navigate potentially challenging portions of the play, which include the continuously shifting identities of four of the six characters, and scenes with abrupt or seemingly no clear transitions between them.

Throughout the play, the characters Korean-American, Korean 1, Korean 2, and Korean 3 (as billed in the play) are named, unnamed, and renamed, even within the same scene. Immediately before the Koreans' first scene, the script notes that: "*the Koreans address each other by constantly changing fake-Asian names, so there's no use trying to keep track*" (43). On the other hand, the two white characters are never named, but their characters remain consistent for the entirety of the play. The stability of their individual characters is reinforced by the constancy of their heterosexual romantic relationship. (In one scene, White Person 1 directly addresses White Person 2 as "Boyfriend.") At no point is the white woman confused for the white man, which contrasts against the Korean characters' seeming interchangeability.

Another challenge for many audience members is that for the first 25 minutes of the play, the three Koreans do not speak in English at all. "When not speaking English, Koreans 1, 2, and 3 speak their native languages [which would be Korean, Chinese, or Japanese]. Ideally, one would speak Korean, one would speak Chinese and one would speak Japanese" (35). In the original production, Koreans 1 and 2 spoke in Korean, while Korean 3 spoke in Chinese, though none of the three demonstrated any apparent difficulty in understanding one another. Those audience members who know any of these languages could enjoy being in on the joke that these three women were speaking "Asian." However, others unfamiliar with these languages may problematically come to the same conclusion.

While the hanbok worn by the three Koreans function specifically as a Korean cultural visual marker, their dialogue in Korean and Chinese connote a more generic pan-Asian culture aurally. The play does not call overt attention to the distinction between

these two languages and neither does it offer any translation for these lines. Those audience members familiar with either Korean or Chinese, or both, can perform their own translations, or at least translations of either of the two languages that are more familiar to them. Those audience members unfamiliar with both languages (presumably the majority of American audiences) may attempt to construct meaning even with their limited resources. Of course, they could rely on non-aural signals (vocal inflection, gesture, costume, movement) or they may choose to simply disengage from these less-intelligible parts of the play. However, even disengagement is—rather than a passive default—an active and uncomfortable choice. As Josephine Lee observes: “The ‘liveness’ or ‘presence’ of theater suggests an immediate, visceral response to the physicality of race; the embodiedness of theater is experienced or felt, as well as seen and heard” (7). Not only is the audience presented with the visible racial difference between the Korean and the white characters, the audience is also confronted with the sound of different untranslated non-English languages.

Sound and music are also important components of the play. *Songs* opens in a darkened theater to the prerecorded sound of playwright Young Jean Lee and her friends talking and laughing, as they prepare for a video shoot, presumably the video that is screened in the beginning of the play.

YEHUDA: On a scale of one to ten what should this be?

YOUNG JEAN: Mmm ...

YEHUDA: Ten being as hard as I'm going to hit you, not as hard as I can hit you.

YOUNG JEAN: Right. Um, you know, I think we should be in, like, communication for the whole thing, because when we did it, it was fine when there was talking. So why don't you start out like pretty soft, and then, you know, like start out with like a one, and then I'll tell you to, like, increase it.

(Everyone giggles as Yehuda lightly taps Young Jean's face.) (36)

A male voice gives direction and his voice is intercut with sounds of slapping. As Lee begins audibly sniffing, a video starts, projected onto the back wall of the stage, showing a close-up of Young Jean Lee visibly crying as she continues to be slapped by someone who remains off-screen, to the soundtrack of traditional Korean music. The sound, direction, and video each highlight the construction of the performance, making the audience uncomfortable perhaps most immediately with its violent content, as well as with the “victim's” active and seemingly willing participation in this performance.

The layering of these elements mirrors the building up of the staged components that immediately follow. As the video turns off, the stage lights turn on, revealing a sole character, Korean-American, standing in the middle of a bare stage. From this single location, she smiles, “looking cute in a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers,” and blinks a few times before delivering a long monologue that is at turns humorous and unnerving (39). As she rails against Asians, Asian Americans, Asian American women, and also white people, her monologue helps make legible the construction of the stereotypical representations of each of these groups. As the play continues, she challenges and helps deconstruct these broad cultural generalizations and draws attention to the social circumstances that inform them without necessarily neatly resolving these tensions.

In this early monologue, Korean-American identifies particular groups of people by race, gender, and generation. In doing so, she establishes how she views the roles of the other characters, the audience, and herself, as well as how she understands the relationships between each group. She opens with: “Have you ever noticed how most Asian-Americans are slightly brain-damaged from having grown up with Asian parents?” (40). Korean-American begins by directly addressing the audience with a rhetorical question, using the generic “you.” She then notes two different groups of people with whom she does not identify: Asian parents and Asian people from Asia.

She finally starts talking about herself (in her first “I” statement), after having established her *dissociation* from these groups: “I am so mad about all of the racist things against me in this country, which is America” (40). This is a blunt statement about the effects of racism on individuals in general, and the effects that she herself feels in particular. This statement preempts the oft-cited argument that racist statements or actions should not be taken “personally.” When kept just in theoretical terms, discriminatory language, discriminatory behaviors, and their negative effects are deflected and seem less harmful. In taking racism personally, standing alone in the middle of an otherwise empty stage, Korean-American calls attention to her own racialized body that is directly affected by these “racist things” and her individual personhood that is challenged by them. Though Karen Shimakawa would add: “Asian American performers never walk onto an empty stage; as James Moy, Robert Lee, and others have demonstrated, that space is always already densely populated with phantasms of orientalism through and against which an Asian American performer must struggle to be seen” (17). While standing physically alone, Korean-American makes clear that she is

responding to such phantasms that are realized, in part, in the characters of Koreans 1, 2, and 3.

Immediately before the Koreans enter the stage, Korean-American ends her monologue with another a direct address to the audience. “White people are so alert to any infringement on their rights. It’s really funny. And the reason why it’s funny is that minorities have all the power. We can take the word racism and hurl it at people and demolish them, and there’s nothing you can do to stop us” (41). Having identified herself as a victim of racism, Korean-American reframes and shifts the relations of power between white Americans and American minorities. By acknowledging and articulating the racism she experiences, she places the pressure back on those white people who are perpetrating such discrimination, specifically by hurling the word racism to demolish them. She suggests that this is a strategy in retaliation she intends to continue using in the future.

Korean-American abruptly ends her warning with the declaration, “Let the Korean dancing begin!” which cues Korean 1, Korean 2, and Korean 3 to enter the stage, prancing, skipping, and giggling (41). The Koreans unceremoniously lift over their hanbok over their heads “so they look like big balls of color, [as they] run in manic circles.”²¹ The scene turns violent, as the Koreans begin smacking Korean-American as they dance around her. Korean-American fights back but unable to hold off the assaults of all three Koreans, she eventually passes out on the floor. This disabuses any assumptions that the audience might make that “the minorities” in the play will

²¹ I should note that some of the earliest lessons that young Korean girls learn about wearing hanbok is how to wrap and tie the skirt, how to hold the skirt closed with the left hand, to ensure that the sokchima (white petticoat underneath) *never* shows, whether walking, sitting, or standing. My first time seeing the Koreans lift their skirts over their heads on stage was both funny and horrifying.

automatically band together against the white people, as Korean-American seems to suggest.

Josephine Lee reads Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's discussion on the trope of doubling in Asian American fiction and drama, which helpfully informs the complex relationship between Korean-American and Koreans 1, 2, and 3. "In a significant number of these works, Asian American characters see their 'racial shadow' projected onto those more 'Asian' than they, and violently reject this personification of their own 'Asian identity.'" (167). Examples of such can be seen in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and David Henry Hwang's *FOB*. There is some resonance of the doubling in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, and even audience members unfamiliar with this trope may be drawn to make this connection between Korean-American and the Koreans. However, the play seems to support a reading of this connection in some scenes and troubles it in others. Korean-American and the Koreans maintain ambivalent feelings toward each other, and Korean-American's being clearly outnumbered (as demonstrated in various altercations throughout the play) makes for an unwieldy doubling.

One might read Koreans 1, 2, and 3 as repetitions of a single stereotypical figure. Even their naming would suggest a lack of individuality. Homi Bhabha would argue, though, that it is from repetition that stereotypes draw power and it is in the deconstruction of this repetition that those being stereotyped might destabilize that power (34). In other words, while some of the individual performances of the three Koreans simply replicate familiar stereotypes, at other moments in the play, their performances help to expose and dismantle the construction of these stereotypes. Josephine Lee also comments on the subversive potential of deliberately stereotypical performance.

Although stereotypes cannot be reappropriated without evoking their racist history, they can nonetheless reveal in their performances the inner dynamics of this history, which already suggest the potential for its disruption. To do this, one must highlight or foreground the anxiety inherent in the performance of the stereotype by overperforming its already exaggerated qualities, pushing violence into hyperbolic slapstick, or forcing its repetition until it becomes monotonous. (96)

The Korean characters, occasionally along with Korean-American, employ all three of these strategies to disrupt the construction of cultural stereotypes.

This is evident in the first two scenes that involve all four of these characters, both of which begin with a dance. Unlike their first scene, in which the dance quickly stops abruptly as all four characters get into a physical fight, the second scene at least begins on a more positive note.

Korean-American walks onstage, unable to resist the charming dance. The Koreans flutter past her in a circle and Korean 3 takes Korean-American gently by the waist, bringing her into the dance. Korean 3 encourages Korean-American to join in the dance. Korean-American imitates their movements clumsily, beaming with happiness. Korean 3 critically eyes Korean-American's dancing and makes a disgusted face, shoving her away. Korean-American glares at the Koreans through the rest of the dance. (46)

In this scene, as in others throughout the play, the Koreans alternate between inviting Korean-American into their various activities and pushing her away. Korean-American

pretty consistently demonstrates interest in being included in their group. She never turns down their invitations to join them, though her attempts to participate in their activities are never entirely successful nor are they always welcome.

After these two rejections from the Koreans, in her next scene with them, Korean-American returns dressed in “*a traditional Korean male jacket, white rubber Korean gardening clogs, and a traditional Korean groom’s hat with flaps on the sides that look like Mickey Mouse ears*” (49). This is the scene in which the Koreans permanently transition from speaking Korean and Chinese to “*speaking English with Asian accents and continue to do so through the rest of the play.*” In her approximated traditional Korean male attire, Korean-American immediately begins disparaging Korean 3 about having been sexually assaulted by her teacher and threatens to take all three Koreans to a little fishing village in Korea to “a crap stand, and on that stand are little pieces of crap that [are sold] for souvenirs, and I am going to take you to that crap stand and sell you there!” (50). Koreans 1 and 2 respond to all of this with confusion and delight.

Having responded to the Koreans’ mistreatment of her in kind, Korean-American then steps forward and shifts her antagonism back to white people.

(To audience) There is a minority rage burning inside of me. And this minority rage comes from the fact that I am a minority, and because minorities are discriminated against. And minorities are discriminated against because there is a thing in the world that is bad, and that thing is racism.

... I hate white people because all minorities secretly hate them.

(The Koreans frantically shake their heads in disagreement, trying to reassure the audience that they don't hate white people.

The audience laughs.

Korean-American turns around to see what's going on and the Koreans freeze.) (50)

The Koreans are horrified by Korean-American's assertions, not just at her own individual opinions, but also that her comments implicate them within this group of minorities who hate white people. The Koreans immediately attempt to placate any potentially offended parties by narrating and miming stereotypical characterizations of Asians in general. Korean 1 describes an island where everyone "dress[es] up in dragon costumes and run[s] around in circles!" while Korean 3 declares: "I'm going to climb up the mountain to look for the silkworm!" Korean 2 recites bad poetry resembling haiku, which she claims had been authored by her pet bird. As opposed to Korean-American's use of the first person pronoun to articulate a collective "minority rage," the Koreans begin each of their statements with "I" only to take on Orientalist stereotypes, which they each perform in ridiculous ways.

Karen Shimakawa's discussion of the performance of the "abject subject" offers a way to read the various iterations of the subject/"I" and usefully contextualizes the anxiety, frustration, desire, and rage that Korean-American's character experiences toward both the Korean and white characters. Shimakawa begins with a reading of Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection:

[Abjection] is, for [Kristeva], the means by which the subject/"I" is produced: by establishing perceptual and conceptual borders around the

self and “jettison[ing]” that which is deemed objectionable, the subject comes into (and maintains) self-consciousness. Read as abject, Asian Americanness thus occupies a role both necessary to and 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.* (3)

In the context of *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, the abjection of Asian American subjectivity simultaneously denies the formation of Korean-American and Korean characters as subjects, while substantiating the already accepted subject formation of the white characters. What is fascinating about this play is that the simultaneous processes of abjection and subject formation are thoughtfully and deliberately constructed, lasting the length of the entire play. In opening with Young Jean Lee’s video and Korean-American’s monologue, the play focuses on the desire for Asian Americans to literally take center stage, and the resultant anxieties that come with pursuing and successfully attaining such visibility. These anxieties are manifested in the Koreans’ and Korean-American’s widely varying addresses to “white patriarchy” and “white people” in general. These anxieties are then seemingly substantiated by the Koreans’ and Korean-American’s continually diminished roles in the play itself, as *Songs* ends with a series of dialogues between just the two white characters.

As Shimakawa suggests, examining the construction of the subject/“I”—as well as the use of other pronouns—can help highlight the various stages of abjection in *Songs*. If subject formation entails recognizing the individuality of the subject, a character’s use of the first person singular pronoun can serve to signal attempts toward claiming his or

her status as an individual subject. The first person *plural* pronoun, in signaling an individual character's membership in a group identity, calls attention to how individual subject formation can also be informed by the individual's willful participation in a particular community. While others' recognition of the individual in that community can be desirable and affirming, the pronoun "we" can also signal the undesired grouping of the individual within a community with which she may not personally identify, as a result of others' generalized misunderstandings. The choices of particular pronouns at specific moments in the play are especially instructive in reading the characters' shifts between gravitating toward either collectivity or individuality, as well as the Korean and Korean-American characters' varied responses to stereotypical objectifications.

The scene with Korean-American's continued monologue and the Koreans' stereotypical performances discussed above is immediately followed by the White Persons' entry into the play. In contrast to the Korean-American and the Koreans' conversations, White Person 1 and White Person 2 very literally mean "I" and "you" in their many conversations about themselves and each other. When White Person 1 and White Person 2 talk about themselves, they very much mean just the two of them. White Person 1 does not speak for all white women, White Person 2 does not speak for all white men, and neither of them speaks for all white people, nor are they expected to do so. The only ambiguity in their use of the first person pronoun is when they use "we" to mean "I," as a way to bring up uncomfortable subjects. For instance, their first dialogue begins with White Person 1 saying, "We have to break up" (52). She opens with "we" but really means "I," as in, "I want to break up with you." The majority of the White characters' conversations revolve around their relationship with one another, in which the two

characters continue to invoke “we,” while each often individually mean “I.” In direct contrast, the Koreans and the Korean American often use the word “I,” but usually seem to speak in a collective sense. This occurs increasingly more frequently as the play progresses, and comes to a dramatic climax in their final two scenes. The penultimate scene involving the entire cast begins with White Persons 1 and 2 yet again fighting about their relationship.

In the middle of their argument, Mariah Carey’s rendition of “All I Want for Christmas Is You” begins to play. Korean 2 chases the White People off stage and Korean 1, Korean 3, and Korean-American join her. Korean-American is wearing a hanbok for the first time in the play, looking more similar to the Koreans in dress. However, her appearance is reminiscent of her awkward dance movements, as her hanbok is arranged clumsily, most obviously evidenced by the messily tied bow in the center of her chest. Nevertheless, for the first time, she is an equal participant in the dance. *“When the bouncy part of the song kicks in, the Koreans and Korean-American take turns walking downstage center to mime a gruesome suicide in a confident manner”* (63). The suicides are creative, involved, and grotesque: *“Korean 1 cuts off two of her fingers with a pair of scissors, then cuts off her tongue and stabs herself in the eyes. Korean 3 drinks a bottle of beer, smashes the bottle over her knee, and uses the broken bottle to cut her wrists.”* Korean-American and the Koreans take repeated turns in miming the willful self-destruction of various parts of their body, one at a time in center stage, the same spot from which Korean-American delivered her two monologues against discrimination earlier in the play.

This is the last of many instances in which the play juxtaposes the Korean-American's and Koreans' stereotypical cuteness with marked violence. It begins with the cute demeanor Korean-American maintains while she delivers her angry monologues, continues with Korean 2 acting out being raped by her schoolteacher while Koreans 1 and 3 giggle and run around pretending to be dragons, and ends with this pairing of an upbeat pop song with the four characters miming suicides. In these moments, and in many others throughout the play, the Koreans and Korean-American play up the image of the stereotypically cute Asian girl (giggling, prancing, posing for pictures), alongside other stereotypical—and sometimes offensively racist—portrayals of Asians (making buck teeth, making “squinty” eyes, performing fake martial arts). These various juxtapositions have a humorous effect, but they draw uneasy laughter.

Josephine Lee's discussion of David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Philip Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die* is instructive in detailing the effects of the performance of stereotypes on the theater stage.

Far from revealing stereotypes to be without “real” effects, these plays emphasize their overdetermined, literal, and pervasive manifestations. Seen in these terms, Hwang and Gotanda create versions of stereotype with undiminished powers. They reproduce them in all their ugliness, anxiety, and seductiveness. But they also register an intensification of anxiety as the stereotype is performed by the Asian body. Rather than simply do violence to the stereotype, these plays expose what is already inherently violent in the performance of the stereotype. (98)

The performances by the Koreans and Korean-American literalize the violence that the performance of the stereotype can enact. One way of understanding the portrayal of a stereotype is as “a violent dismemberment that focuses attention on particular body parts and features (in the case of Asians, eyes, noses, and hair, as well as skin) by highlighting or visually severing them from the rest of the body. This dismemberment preserves the fantasy of the oppressor’s self as unified, coherent, orderly, and rational” (89).

Stereotypes illustrated in gestures or caricatures enact a figurative dismemberment, as they reduce individuals to particular, often exaggerated, features or body parts. In *Songs*, this dismemberment is made more literal in the mimed performances of the four characters. Their stereotypical, abjected, and dismembered selves contrast strongly against the relatively more “unified, coherent, orderly, and rational” white characters, who “*enter with chairs and shoo the Koreans offstage, shaking their chairs at the Koreans like lion tamers*” (64).

In their short scene, the White characters also play-act, though their performance is much less violent and far less interesting than the suicides that precede it. They make up a situation in which White Person 2, as the Vice President of the United States, interviews White Person 1 for a government position and extends a job offer. White Person 2 declines. The Koreans and Korean-American interrupt the scene by walking in front of the White Persons and standing in a row in front of them, where they deliver what sounds like what should be a monologue, except it is spoken by all of four characters and is delivered in unison. The lines all refer to a singular “I,” which is repeated throughout their “monologue”:

Hello. Thank you all for coming here today. Your eyes are not worthy of ... I mean, my face is not worthy of the strain of your eyes to look at it. My ears are not worth the effort of ... um. My voice is not worthy of the effort of your ears to listen to it. It breaks my heart that it's hard for me to say I'm sorry. (65)

The tone of their words is deferential, at turns grateful and apologetic. They/"I" begin their "monologue" in a direct address to the audience. While the Koreans and Korean-American had challenged the audience to see difficult, violent imagery and listen to unfamiliar and untranslated language earlier in the play, in this address, performed entirely in slow, clearly articulated English, they apologize for the strain the audience may endure in seeing and hearing them/"me" at all.

This is a stark contrast to Korean-American's assertive tone in her opening monologue during which she communicates her "minority rage," as well as her pity for the weakness and obliviousness of her audience. In this earlier scene, she revels in the power she wields with the power of the word "racism," and ends with a direct threat: "I can promise you one thing, which is that we will crush you. You may laugh now, but remember my words when you and your offspring are writing under our yoke."

In stark contrast, in this final address, the Koreans and Korean-American make no claims to having any such power, and even go so far as to admit that they/"I" are unclear as to where the play itself is going.

I don't know what the white people are doing in this show. I don't even know what the Asian people are doing. All I know is that I come up with all this racist shit, and when minorities get mad I'm like, "Go to hell, you

unfashionably angry minorities, this is my sophisticated critique of racism that you are too stupid to understand.” (66)

The term “unfashionably angry minorities” could have easily described the Korean-American herself at the beginning of this play. This address distinguishes the characters/“I” from her earlier position and deflects, rather than addresses, the angry minorities’ anger with the argument that they are subverting the racism in a way they/“I” won’t bother explaining. But as the address continues, they/“I” admit:

I want to be white. I want to get really annoyed whenever anyone brings up race.

I love the white patriarchy with all my heart because I’m ambitious and want power. My whole mentality is identical in structure to that of a sexist, racist, homosexual white male. People think of me as this empowered Asian female, but really, I’m just a fucking white guy.

And some of you may be thinking, “Oh man, this is a speech about how white people suck. This is so much less complicated and interesting than all the other parts of the show that weren’t just about race.” But don’t worry. If enough white people hate it, I’ll cut it.

I apologize for bringing shame upon my country.

(They bow and shuffle backward offstage, parting like a curtain, with two exiting stage right and two exiting stage left, revealing the White People.)

Not only is this the most direct address in the entire play, they/“I” suggest the possibility that “if enough white people hate it,” the speech would be cut. Of course, this is not a sincere claim as this parting address has been kept in the show, through numerous live

productions and in its now widely circulated print script. This particular statement is just one of the many disingenuous components of this “monologue.” Korean-American and the Koreans also maintain a uniformly monotonous tone throughout and pause at orchestrated moments to allow the audience’s laughter to die down. Even if the audience were unsure whether to laugh or not, these pauses encourage them to respond to the performance to help fill these silence. However, as for the characters themselves, as they deliver their lines without any particular emotion or inflection, it is difficult to ascertain their own feelings about their speech.

However, one result of their “monologue” is that it addresses the possibility that no one knows where the play is going, a thought that seems to have been building throughout the production. While in several other parts of the play, the Koreans and Korean-American break the fourth wall, it is in their final scene that they are most explicit in acknowledging the relations of power in the space of a live performance. Josephine Lee observes that in most plays, “[t]he audience of realism remains unacknowledged, hidden in the darkness of the theater, but its very invisibility affords it a privileged, authoritative position” (38). In addressing the audience so directly and in offering, however (in)sincerely, to invite the audience’s input, the four characters pointedly call attention to the privilege that the members of the audience have in their position to silently, invisibly judge their performance from a comfortable distance.

As Karen Shimakawa states, the relations of power in live performance are specular in nature. It is

through a process of *looking at* (which may or may not result in *seeing*)
that which is designated object and recognizing one’s own bodily relation

to abjection. What I am suggesting is that there is also a way to conceive of that process from the perspective of the one being looked at (or looked past/through), the one inhabiting the body and space of abjection, and that this constitutive and dynamic relationship between seeing and being, between seeing and feeling, is what makes *performance* a particularly fruitful site at which to examine the process of national abjection that produces Asian Americanness. (19)

Ultimately, the audience is asked to see *past* or *through* the Koreans and the Korean-American to the two remaining characters for the remainder of the show (which constitutes about a third of the entire play). This is strongly evoked in their parting like a curtain, as if to re-present, or present for the first time, the show.

It would be easy to accept that *Songs* does become, in fact, a play about white people in love—as the subtitle of the play would suggest—and that the Korean-American and Koreans are silenced and edited out. Such a reading would follow the lines of familiar critiques against the appropriation of space and resources in the acts of cultural, political, and social domination, both in and out of the theater. However, it feels strange that the four other characters never return, and not only because the two white characters, though somewhat comical, are not very interesting. The questions raised about what the white people or even what the Asian people are doing in the show linger, particularly in the absence of Korean-American and the Koreans. The reminder of their abjection persists in their absence, and though the White characters more closely resemble traditional mainstream American theater, in the end, they have less to offer the overall production.

Through the abjection and absencing of the Korean-American and Korean characters, along with the eventual shift in focus to the white characters, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* poses such questions as: What kind of depth and development do we, as the audience, expect to see (and want to see) in characters in a live performance? Why are certain portrayals (of white and non-white) characters familiar and enjoyable? And how does theater intersect with our lived experiences? Jeffrey M. Jones notes that *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* is the result of Young Jean Lee's asking herself, "What's the worst possible play I could write—the last kind of play I would ever think about writing" (183). In *Songs*, Lee engages her own characters and invites the audience to actively participate in the deliberately messy production of this play. In this way, the play provokes the audience, challenging them to make meaning with the play's seemingly disparate parts, almost daring them not to respond to the performance.

Interpellated Subjects in *Clay Walls*

While *Clay Walls* presents a more traditional narrative compared to both *Dictee* and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, it does include temporal shifts and geographic migrations that effectively destabilize the characters' understandings of "home." This is due less to the formal qualities of the work—as contrasted from both *Dictee* and *Songs*—and more so due to the historical context in which the work is set. As Kandice Chuh notes, *Clay Walls* "point[s] to Korean nationalism, Japanese colonialism, and U.S. racism as distinguishable but inseparably linked historical narratives that simultaneously underwrite the production of Korean and Korean American

subjectivities.” (*Imagine Otherwise* 88). As *Clay Walls* triangulates Korea, Japan, and the United States, the specific vocabulary and languages in which the concepts of “home” and “foreigner” is articulated—in and between these countries—help demonstrate how the characters’ sense of space is continually challenged and necessarily redefined. The interpellation of characters establishes relationships between speakers and addressees. *Clay Walls* explores disingenuous and even derogatory interpellations through the words “yobo,” “yoboseyo,” and “waenom” (여보; 여보세요; 외놈). A close reading of these Korean words demonstrates how the subject in *Clay Walls* is constructed relationally, in both public and private spaces. The interpellated characters’ understandings of “home” are produced violently, and in turn, effect violent consequences.

The word “yoboseyo” begins with the same two characters as “yobo” and ends with the formal speech-level ending. “Yoboseyo” is the most commonly used phrase one would say when picking up a telephone call, to which the caller often also repeats back, “neh, yoboseyo,” (yes, hello) in response. One exception would be if the recipient immediately recognizes the caller, at which point he may instead respond by saying “neh,” followed by the caller’s name. In these early exchanges, both parties are working to ascertain the identity of the person with whom they are speaking in order to determine what their relationship to each other would be. Having done so, they can then adjust their speech to use the appropriate speech-level endings to continue the conversation. This social negotiation is fairly quick for fluent speakers. In the case that the two are strangers, the conversation would typically continue on the polite speech level.

In contrast, “yobo,” on its own, functions as a noun and is used on an intimate speech level. This call verbally establishes a spousal relationship between the one calling

and the one being called. The word “yobo” is a term of endearment similar to “sweetheart” or “honey,” and is used exclusively between married couples. This was a very common term during the period in which *Clay Walls* is set, and today is used more commonly among older married couples. Regardless, any married Korean speaker would know the one person who would be calling them “yobo.” Hence, this call does not necessitate the kind of complex social maneuvering that any conversation beginning with “yoboseyo” entails.

The first mention of “yobo” in *Clay Walls* appears early in the novel, as Haesu and her friend Clara are setting up for a meeting of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Association of Koreans. Haesu asks Clara how “yobo” would be translated in English. “*Yobo* was another commonly used word for which Clara had searched for an English counterpart. She thought ‘you there’ was something like it but laughed when Haesu said ‘you there’ to Chun and suggested she stick to *yobo*. As even more Koreans arrived, ‘*Yobo!*’ spanned the room” (14). Clara seems to be drawing more from the way the term “yoboseyo” is used in her explanation of “yobo.” Part of the humor lies in Clara’s realizing that her attempted translation of “yobo” turned this call that, in Korean, uniquely connects two spouses to one another into a phrase that, in English, could potentially be used to anyone of any relation, in a casual, and almost demeaning way. While “yobo” does specially designate one’s spouse, as this scene demonstrates, this call is commonly used in public spaces.

The fact that this is simultaneously an intimate call, but also a common one to hear in public spaces, allows the Japanese military police in *Clay Walls* to duplicitously use the call, “yobo,” to try and catch Korean men attempting to escape over the border to

China, during the colonial period. Even while knowing that they themselves are not being called, children grow up hearing this call and may turn when hearing “yobo,” to see which of their parents are calling the other. Chun is warned of this trick as he prepares for his own escape.

In the days that followed, he found refuge with sympathizers, cast from one Korean patriot to another until he reached China. Even there he was in constant fear of his life. Posing as a Chinese, he was fearful that he would forget the warnings of his countrymen and turn his head at the shout of “*Yobo!*”, a trick the Japanese secret police use to single out Koreans. (156)

Kandice Chuh notes the various levels of irony in this situation: “That it is Chun’s home language, Korean, that has the potential to facilitate his demise is significant to understanding [Ronyoung] Kim’s interrelation of language and national identity. In the scenario of this passage, there is a collapse of distinction between language and identity that impels physical removal to another place” (“Imaginary Borders” 287). This deception relies on tricking the escaping Korean to respond to an intimate call in his home language. Responding to this call would immediately threaten one’s physical person and literalizes the danger that Louis Althusser cautions against. However, Chun’s physical survival requires him to *not* respond and to *not* return to his home in Korea. Ironically, it is only in *ignoring* the Korean call and in *leaving* Korea that Chun can establish a life with Haesu.

Returning to the “yobo” of “yoboseyo,” the metaphor of a telephone call is useful in considering the intimacy and immediate danger inherent in the seemingly casual

encounter established over a phone call.²² Avital Ronell expands on the possibilities of such an exchange: “One need only consult the literatures trying to contain the telephone in order to recognize the persistent trigger of the apocalyptic call. It turns on you: it’s the gun pointed at your head” (6). The traditional function of the telephone is to provide to one from inside one’s home a potential connection to those outside of it. Over the course of the narrative, Chun is constantly negotiating how to distinguish the boundaries of his idea of home. During his short engagement with Haesu, Chun would identify his home, first as the imagined domestic space he hopes to share with her, and second as the country of Korea—even in its occupied state. However, he must necessarily make a choice between the two. The Japanese call of *yobo* threatens both of Chun’s homes in significant ways: most immediately, in the impersonation of the spouse’s call—disrupting what is normally a domestic exchange—and secondly, in the successful colonization of Korea. Telephone users are conditioned to pick up the phone when it rings, and hesitating seems to run counter to this ingrained impulse. All telephone calls carry potential danger, and this danger can only be ascertained *after* already having entered into a telephonic exchange, at which point, it is too late. It is this impulse that Chun learns to unlearn as he crosses the border to China, en route to America.

In contrast to the term “yobo,” which is meant to both call and name the addressee, the term “wae nom” is rarely used as a call, and primarily describes an absent third party. Also, it is far from a term of endearment. The hanja character “wae” denotes

²² The following passage from *Dictée* also raises the dangers inherent in such calls: “She decides to take the call. Takes it at once. Her voice is as if she holds this receiver for the very first time. This foreign instrument that carries the very sounds to the words. The very words. From when the call is announced to her to the moment she picks up the receiver she does not think. She hears the ringing and the call is announced. She walks to it, picks it up but she has not had the time to think. All had been prepared All had been rehearsed beforehand. To the pause, over and over in her mind. The brief pause in the beginning before she would say yes” (139).

foreignness or the outside. The Korean character “nom” generally means “guy” in a fairly casual way, but can range in its connotations depending on the other characters that precede “nom,” and the context in which it is used. “Wae nom” is a pretty derogatory term, and can be translated as “foreign bastard.” This term has been used to describe the Japanese in general, particularly during the colonial period. In these instances, in designating another person a wae nom, the speaker is claiming native status and a unique relationship to his nation of residence, even despite the restriction of freedoms and privileges under the colonial government. In this sense, calling another a “wae nom” can also be understood as a signal of protest.

There are several instances in which “wae nom” is used in *Clay Walls* to describe “those Japanese” in general terms, which clearly evoke the binary relationships of insider/outsider, native/foreign, colonized/colonizer. However, interestingly, in *Clay Walls*, the term is more often used to describe specific individual characters whose characters’ relationship to Japan and Korea seem dangerously unclear. In 1920s Los Angeles, the setting in which the narrative opens, the status of the Korean immigrants seems indeterminate. As expatriates of a colonized nation, their political status is in flux as geopolitical situations shift. Further, the extent of most of the white American characters’ understanding of East Asia extends only as far as Japan and China and usually does not even include Korea. In response to these situations, many of the characters go beyond simply identifying as Korean to insist on distinguishing themselves from Japanese, Japanese Americans, or Japanese sympathizers, often using the word “wae nom” to mark this distinction.

The first time that this term is mentioned is appropriately during Haesu's first trip back to Korea, while aboard a ship on the Pacific Ocean, where she is literally floating and is physically distanced from all land masses, including Korea, Japan, and America. She and her three children are traveling on a Japanese ship, the *Taiyo Maru*, and Haesu is intent on eventually relocating her family back to Korea. Early in the voyage, she finds her room uninhabitable due to its broken furniture and the heat and noise coming out of the motors in the next room. Her request to Captain Yamamoto for a room change goes unanswered until she raises the possibility that there may be a discriminatory motive behind her room assignment, especially given that no other passengers had been assigned to the steerage class, as she and her children had been. "It would not surprise me at all if I was given this room because I am Korean." She had no idea why she said that but it obviously had an effect. ... "There's no need to deny it. We both know the Japanese attitude toward Koreans." (69). Given his initially cold response to Haesu's request and his Japanese last name, Haesu's daughter Faye assumes Captain Yamamoto is Japanese and whispers to Haesu: "He's a *wae nom*, isn't he?" using the derogatory term for 'Japanese' reserved for Korean ears." It is surprising that even the youngest character in *Clay Walls* would use such a strong term so familiarly and casually. This suggests that this was a familiar, and even acceptable, term for Faye to use, as Haesu does not correct or scold her. Meanwhile, having overheard and understood their conversation in Korean, Captain Yamamoto reveals to them that he is, in fact, Korean.

He later explains to Haesu that when he was young, his father had moved his family to Japan and renounced his Korean name, Park Chon Tak. Captain Yamamoto continued living his life as a Japanese man and it is unclear to Haesu if even his Japanese

wife knows of his ethnic identity. Finding these cultural designations and territorial disputes disagreeable, Yamamoto (formally Park) states his preference for life on the sea. “As for being on land, I hate being on land. Entanglements, unresolvable commitments, a web of illogical complications. Because of what happens on land I am forced to be an impersonator at sea.’ ... ‘It is impossible to plant a flag on water” (76-77). He seems to fully accept that: “Territoriality literalizes nation, lending to it a palpability that contributes to its sense of inevitability” (Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise* 86). Yamamoto, rather than resigning himself to the inevitability of the entanglements and complications that would ensue, escapes to the seemingly borderless waters, never having to fully commit to any one nation for any long stretch of time.

While somewhat sympathetic to his situation, Haesu does not see detachment from Korea’s political situation as a viable choice for herself, and she “resented his references to Koreans as ‘they” (77). Once Haesu lands in Japan, on her final stopover on her way to Korea, it is revealed by an underground activist, who was also aboard the *Taiyo Maru*, that “Park [Yamamoto’s Korean name] is a traitor to his people. He is worse than a Japanese” (96). It is in this section that *Clay Walls* begins to explore how complex relationships between the Japanese and Koreans can be, both in colonial Korea, and especially once they move beyond the borders of East Asia. In Los Angeles, in the meetinghouse of the National Association of Koreans, hearing from nationalist Korean leaders on the ongoing abuses of the Japanese colonial government, it is easy for Haesu to identify her allies and her enemies. However, while she believes the reports to be factually correct, they remain a distant reality. It is on the *Taiyo Maru* that Haesu is directly confronted with a more ambiguous situation where cultural and political

allegiances are not as clearly defined as she had thought them to be. This serves as an important precursor to her children's experiences with such ambiguities in both Korea and back in the United States.

Not too long after her arrival in Korea, Haesu is sought out by two Korean police officers enlisted by the Japanese colonial government. She observes that the younger officer "wasn't much older than Harold," her oldest son (109). The older of the two officers questions her about an undercover activist named Kim Taeyul with whom she had spoken while on the *Taiyo Maru*. The police officer requests that she "please respond in Japanese," and reminds her that she is "still a citizen of Korea and under Japanese jurisdiction." "In a rather Foucauldian manner, *Clay Walls* illustrates the ways that meaning and truth are produced by and contingent upon relations of power" (Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise* 98). As she is interpellated as a Korean citizen "under Japanese jurisdiction" by two ethnic Koreans working on behalf of the Japanese government, Haesu struggles to make sense of each one's cultural and political affiliations. Having experienced American racism and in her frustration in her inability to fully express herself in English, Haesu had returned to Korea, looking forward to being back home. She had expected that the comforts of her class privilege and that being a part of the ethnic majority again would make life easier for her and for her children. Instead, she finds that they need to hide their wealth, watch what they say, and try and be as inconspicuous as possible. "She was out of sorts in her homeland, homesick in Korea without being homesick for America" (125). She is eventually released from her interrogation by a childhood friend, who has become the police chief of their local precinct.

Soon after Haesu's visit to the police station, Harold befriends the younger of the two interrogating officers while playing basketball. The younger officer's Korean family name is Yun but he goes by the Japanese name Okada. Haesu cautions Harold to be careful not to reveal too much information about their family. Harold defends his new friend and Haesu feels badly that she may be putting too much pressure on her children. However, a week later, Harold comes home in a state of shock in seeing Yun get into a fight with another kid.

“He just shot this kid! This little kid, no bigger than John, called Yun a ‘*wae nom*’, pulled out a Korean flag, and yelled, ‘*Mansei!* May Korea live ten thousand years! *Mansei!*’ ... He told Yun he was worse than a ‘*wae nom*’, a disgrace to his family and to his country. ... Then I heard a shot.”

(124)

Haesu is struck by the violence of the situation, by how young these two youths are (as they are each close in age to her two sons), how much more restrictive life in colonial Korea has become, and how the cultural conflict she had inherited from her parents and their generation was being passed down to her children's generation.

In these two instances, the derogatory term “*wae nom*” is being applied to ethnic Koreans who are seen as traitors. Whereas the Korean characters in *Clay Walls* are resistant to, but unsurprised by, their mistreatment by the Japanese colonial officials, they have a difficult time tolerating Koreans who side with the colonial powers. Captain Yamamoto is called “worse than a Japanese,” and Yun is called “worse than a ‘*wae nom*,’” which amounts to about the same thing. Haesu sees that even Korea could not offer the kind of security she had not been able to find in America for her family. Before

leaving Los Angeles, she had planned to sell their house to finance their move back to Korea. After hearing of the altercation that Harold had witnessed, she hurriedly sends a telegraph to Chun not to sell.

The last time that the term “*wae nom*” is invoked is about a decade later in the narrative, when America enters World War II. Haesu is excited to hear about America joining the international conflict, as it is broadcast on an American radio station: “The *wae nom* bombed Pearl Harbor! ... The fools. They can’t beat the United States. They’ll get what they deserve. At last, Korea will have her independence” (261). As her daughter, Faye, worries about the larger implications of war, Haesu expresses confidence in the American military and shushes Faye to listen to the rest of the report. Faye observes:

The radio announcer spoke of sneak attacks, ships sinking, fires, deaths, war. He said nothing about Korean independence. ... It wasn’t long before the phone began to ring. Koreans were getting in touch with their countrymen. They talked excitedly as they cursed the Japanese, cheered for the United States, and planned their country’s independence.

The first- and second-generation Korean Americans’ immediately begin to contribute to the war effort, which serves the dual purpose of demonstrating their American patriotism (especially with Japan as a common enemy), while also providing a tangible way in which to work towards Korean independence from Japanese occupation. They even take to wearing badges identifying themselves as Korean, and therefore *not* Japanese. Sadly, this was a common practice that Koreans and other Asian Americans employed to protect themselves from discrimination in the early part of the twentieth century, and especially during World War II.

Despite these efforts, the Korean and Korean American characters in *Clay Walls* are still repeatedly misidentified as Japanese, which greatly upsets them. While such misidentifications are initially verbally threatening at most, the potential for Koreans to be sent to internment camps along with the Japanese Americans jolts the community.

“As far as the United States government is concerned, we are part of Japan,” Uncle Min said.

... “Ignorance! Plain ignorance!” Uncle Lee spewed. “What do they think we’ve been screaming about all these years? Why do they think we’ve been demanding recognition as a separate nation?” (263)

Uncle Lee’s indignation would have been shared by the tens of thousands of Nisei Japanese Americans holding American citizenship, who also had no political affiliation with the nation of Japan nor had any involvement in the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Ironically, just as Uncle Lee and others are unable, or unwilling, to distinguish between the Japanese and Japanese Americans, this same dangerously flawed and discriminatory logic that initiated Japanese internment is what opens the possibility for Korean Americans to be interned as well.

In effect, [John L. DeWitt and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson] imagined a *nikkei transnation* out of a belief in the essential and delocalized sameness of Japanese regardless of borders, nativity, or citizenship. Linking foreignness with race, they constructed a fantasy in which Japaneseness overflowed Japan’s sovereign territory to constitute a simultaneously internal and external threat to the United States.

(Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise* 65)

In the imagining of Korea as a further extension of the Japanese nation, the presumed sameness of Japanese further disregards ethnicity, nationality, or even Japan's then colonial presence on the Korean peninsula.

Closer to home, Faye, now in high school, experiences misidentification with the Japanese in her own neighborhood. Shortly after the announcement that Japanese Americans would be sent to internment camps, Faye's childhood friend and neighbor stops by. "Bertha was the first to make me realize what it meant. . . . 'I came to say goodbye and to let you know I think the whole thing stinks,' she said" (263). After a moment of confusion, Faye explains to her Bertha that she is not Japanese. Later, as Faye watches Japanese families ride away on trucks with their belongings to internment camps, an elderly African American man tells her, "'Lord, child, don't look so sad. There'll be another one coming along soon. They's not going to forget you'" (266).

The distinctions underlying terms like "yobo" and "wae nom" are meant to establish and protect boundaries around understandings of "home" and "foreigner," and especially to distinguish the differences *between* these two specific terms. However, *Clay Walls* demonstrates that outside of the Korean language and outside of the immediate Korean communities (even in the nation of Korea itself), such distinctions are difficult to maintain on absolutely clear terms with reliable consistency. This further affects the construction of the Korean American subject in these shifting and complex circumstances. The continual challenge for the Korean and Korean American characters in *Clay Walls* is then not only to establish a sense of their own subjecthood for themselves, but to be able to articulate it to others as well. The challenge of articulating

oneself and making oneself legible is a challenge that is also taken up in the writing of *Clay Walls* itself, and one that resonates with much of Asian American literature.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the protagonist reflects on how it felt to learn to assert herself as an individual, when she first started attending school in the United States:

Reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say, but I stopped often, and the teacher would think I'd gone quiet again. I could not understand "I." The Chinese "I" has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American "I," assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; "I" is a capital and "you" is lower-case. I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it. (166-167)

The protagonist of *The Woman Warrior* has no trouble narrating from the first person perspective. It is when the "I" is enclosed in quotation marks, particularly when it is understood as an American English-language "I," and when it must be spoken out loud, that her confidence falters.

The multiple "I"s that have emerged in these readings of *Dictée*, *Songs*, and *Clay Walls*, in all kinds of indirect ways, speak to this particular struggle. These texts represent a range of genres and formal elements, and each work individually crosses genres and breaks from traditional narratives. The richness that these multiple forms of narrative

offer provides a multiplicity of ways to approach the absent, abject, and interpellated subjects in linguistic transit. As suggested throughout these readings, rather than approach these subjects as fragmented or split, these three works demonstrate the many ways in which the reader and viewer can understand the complex, often confusing, subjects they present and invite the audience to participate in their construction.

Chapter Three: Recalling Early Cinema "... in Translation"

The television series *Lost* (2004-2010) had initially been produced primarily for an English-speaking American audience. Since then, the linguistic diversity of the cast and its subsequent international distribution have helped increase the show's international appeal. Subtitles, technological manipulation, and language training for actors have all contributed to increase both cultural and linguistic diversity on the show. The multiplicity of languages represented in the show opens up different possibilities for facilitating, complicating, or obstructing communication between characters in the show itself, as well as between the show and its audience. This chapter investigates those moments in which communication between characters becomes difficult. It is not surprising that such situations are often depicted in terms of the culpability of the non-English speaker for his inability to communicate or his seeming unwillingness to make himself understandable. However, in *Lost*, there are specific resonances of Korean cinematic history that can offer nuanced readings of such moments.

Lost explores these issues primarily through the characters Sun-Hwa Paik and Jin-Soo Kwon, who speak only in Korean through most of the show's first season. The portrayals of these two characters simultaneously recall earlier moments of global cinematic history and also contribute to the growing presence of Asian and Asian American actors in contemporary American popular culture. In this way, the characters of Sun and Jin encourage viewers to look to the past at the emergence of film as a global phenomenon and also to look forward to the possibility of an increasing diversity of representations in American media. Both of these impulses reflect contemporary anxieties that trouble the myth of American national unity.

While there are many other examples in contemporary American film and television that raise these same concerns, what makes the characters of Sun and Jin unique is that in *Lost*, the sources of conflict surrounding these characters are prominently raised through the show's focus on language and sound. As Sun and Jin are Korean—as distinguished from Korean American—among a group of primarily American characters (of diverse backgrounds), they are alternately read as persistently foreign and as actively assimilating over the course of the series. In this way, they are not only visually distinguished as racially other, but they are also linguistically marked. Rather than relying solely on visual readings to represent cultural difference, *Lost* focuses on the sound of difference by incorporating multilingualism, untranslated Korean (and other languages), and accented speech.

Elements of early cinema—and of early cinema in Korea, in particular—are helpful to consider in analyzing the show's depictions of complexly layered multilingual situations because of the conscious ways early cinema negotiates sound, image, and text. Alfred Hitchcock, asked about the shift from silent to sound films, has noted, “The dialogue almost comes in like titles in the early part of the picture. But I think what sound brought of value to the cinema was to complete the realism of the image on the screen.” The synchronization of sound and image made both of these two elements less individually conspicuous, while also diminishing the need for titles. In depicting Sun and Jin's struggles to communicate with those around them, the show reverts to early cinematic technique to make these challenges more explicit. This is helpful to consider when reading the minimal subtitling of the early *Lost* episodes. Further, the *pyonsa*, the live film narrator who first emerged during Korea's colonial period, repeatedly resonates

in the character of Sun in moments when she translates and attempts to mediate conflicts. As the earliest film screenings in Korea coincided with the first decade of the Japanese colonial period, the negotiation of multiple languages and national affiliations took place both on and off the film screen.

The premise of *Lost* is that a plane had departed from Sydney en route to Los Angeles. It crashes on a mysterious island, stranding a large group of survivors on the beach, including the characters of Sun and Jin. Prior to their trip to Australia, Sun had been making plans to escape her deteriorating marriage and to relocate to America. As part of her preparation, she had secretly been taking English language lessons. On the island, after the plane crashes, in order to continue keeping this secret from Jin, Sun feigns an inability to communicate with the other survivors. She does so to protect her already fragile relationship with Jin, as he is unaware of her language abilities—as well as her reason for having recently gained English language fluency—and further, as he himself does not speak English. For most of the first season, Sun and Jin speak almost exclusively to each other, and in Korean, most of which is untranslated.

Many viewers had noted, upon the airing of the first season, that the depictions of Sun and Jin are uncomfortable to watch for a number of reasons. Jin's domineering attitude and Sun's submission seem anachronistic and their characters reinforce negative stereotypes of Korean, and more generally Asian, cultures as both regressive and sexist. South Korean viewers have been especially vocal about their disagreement with the portrayal of Jin and Sun's characters in the first few seasons. Members of Korean production teams who translated and aired *Lost* in South Korea expressed disbelief and disappointment in the early development of both characters. For instance, in an interview

with Hyo Jin Kim, Won Ho Sup, one of the Korean voice actors for *Lost*, expresses concern that “foreign viewers [might] assume Jin [to be] a typical Korean husband” (Kim 44). The dubbing producer for *Lost*, Won Suk Suh discusses how the Korean production team had tried to correct some of these unflattering portrayals. “We’ve tried to adapt or edit some scenes to fit in Korean reality. Jin seems so stereotypically patriarchal that he [seems to have come from an] ancient era. He does not represent these days’ a Korean husband at all” (Kim 43). Across a number of Hyo Jin Kim’s interviews in her study of South Korean viewers’ responses to *Lost*, there is general consensus that Sun similarly “represents an old-fashioned Asian woman.” According to Kim’s research, Korean television audiences do not see Sun and Jin as representative of contemporary South Korean society. Rather, they see that these characters have been conflated with general stereotypes of Asian cultures that disregard ethnic or national specificity or actual lived conditions in Asia today (Kim 48). What makes *Lost* distinct, both in its production and its reception, is that the show’s creators would seem to already be aware of the loaded nature of stereotypes. The wide diversity of their cast would suggest that they are invested in presenting more inclusive representations than are typically found in American media. Viewers similarly seem to expect more from the show than most others. Perhaps these elevated expectations had made such disappointments feel even more acute.

There is a long history of gendered representations of Asian and Asian American characters in American media that continue with the portrayals of Sun and Jin in the first season of *Lost*. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous critique of “white men saving brown women from brown men” addresses several problematic assumptions: the need for

brown men and women to change (or, more specifically, to “Westernize”), the inability of brown men to change, and the inability of brown women to save themselves from undesirable situations (296). This has been a common trope in European and American literature of the past two centuries, with *Madame Butterfly* perhaps as the most well-known example.

In the first season, Sun and Jin seem to fall into this familiar plot. Jin wants to restrict Sun’s contact with others and criticizes her clothes which he considers to be immodest. She agrees to his demands, albeit reluctantly. In their first scene together in the pilot episode of *Lost*, Jin tells Sun (in subtitled Korean), “You must not leave my sight. You must follow me wherever I go. Do you understand?” Sun nods unenthusiastically with her gaze lowered. Jin continues, “Don’t worry about the others. We need to stay together.” She slowly nods again. Jin concludes the conversation by nodding his own head emphatically, almost as if to compensate for her relative unresponsiveness, and perhaps also to signal an end to this conversation that her silence leaves ambiguous. This exchange is conducted entirely in Korean, as are most of their conversations throughout the first season. Sun and Jin’s speaking only in Korean in the show’s earliest episodes only underscores Sun’s seeming helplessness and isolation. This also reinforces their foreignness and seeming unassimilability with the rest of the characters.

This does allow Sun to share an intimacy with Jin that not even the viewers can initially access, as much of their lines are untranslated and unsubtitled throughout the first season. However, this intimacy does not seem entirely desirable, and it is an unstable one as Sun’s duplicity and Jin’s demanding expectations of Sun eventually prove too

strenuous for the two of them to sustain. Further, in their earliest scenes, their conversations consist of Jin speaking and Sun listening and responding non-verbally, demonstrating the imbalance of power in their relationship. Sun and Jin's untranslated scenes rely heavily on visual and other aural cues to highlight the escalating drama between them, again recalling moments of early cinema.

Early Cinematic Technique in *Lost*

The title sequence in *Lost* is played between the first and second scenes of the episode, as is often the case with many other contemporary shows. However, as compared to those of other shows, the title sequence in *Lost* is fairly brief (running at about twelve seconds) and minimalist in its presentation of the word "LOST" in white text on a black background. In this way, the opening title of each of the *Lost* episodes is reminiscent of early film titles. This also calls attention to the function of the opening title and subtitles in the show as deliberately suggestive, rather than as offering comprehensive explanation. In this way, the show's opening title, as well as its selective subtitles, often aligns more closely with the titles and intertitles of early films than with opening titles of other contemporary shows.

While giving some information to support narrative progression, the presentation of minimal titling in *Lost* encourages the audience to turn to visual details, aural cues, or the content of preceding or subsequent episodes for a richer understanding of the show. Rather than look to titles and subtitles for comprehensive explanation, viewers are encouraged to consider them as one of several ways to engage with *Lost*. The suggestive quality of the titles in *Lost* and the need to look elsewhere for their context is perhaps

most blatantly evident in the episode title, "... In Translation," the seventeenth episode of the first season, which is the first to focus on Jin's character.

The ellipses in "... In Translation" function as a placeholder for the word "lost," evoking the name of the show while completing the familiar (and trite) phrase "lost in translation." Each of the elements of the title of this episode—the two words "in translation," the missing word that is supplied elsewhere, and the ellipses that denote both lack and excess—exist in multiple spaces: on the television screen, in speech, and in the content of the episode itself. The imprecision evoked in the ellipses as a punctuation mark itself also visually connotes the concept of being lost. The physical markings of the ellipses itself also denote ambiguity. "[T]he ellipsis, in its singularity, is not a "single" mark but rather a triple "one" or a "concrete multiple" (Brody 76). The simultaneity of the single and the multiple is evoked in the show's multiple temporalities (which include flashbacks, flash-forwards, and flash-sideways). While the viewers have access to the various plotlines in this episode, the characters within the show are understood to be restricted to one linear timeline at any given moment.

Throughout the first season, Jin genuinely understands very little English. Between his reserved, distrustful, and independent nature and his limited ability to communicate with the rest of the survivors, Jin is the least legible character in the first season of *Lost*. Locke and especially Jack are two white male protagonists who emerge as strong contrasts to Jin. While eccentric and often lost in his own thoughts, Locke emerges as one of the leaders among the group of survivors. His quiet and reflective manner draws others to confide in him. He often offers sage advice that helps to resolve conflicts among

the group. He is also adept at boar hunting and tracking. His physical survival skills along with his philosophical inclinations present him as a richly complex character.

Similarly, Jack has much to offer the survivors. The pilot episode, in essence the series itself, begins with an extreme close-up of Jack's eye, as he wakes up to find himself stranded in the jungle. He follows the sound of screaming and runs through the wild foliage to the beach where the camera pans, for the first time, the horrific aftermath of the plane crash. Sections of the plane are burning, mangled bodies are strewn across the sand, and many of the remaining survivors are screaming, frantically looking for loved ones, searching for supplies, and tending to their injuries. As a trained surgeon, Jack immediately responds to some of the most urgent medical situations, moves the bodies of the injured away from the wreckage, and instructs others as to how they can help. The survivors continue to rely on Jack's leadership as they set up camp and look for ways off of the island.

Next to Jack and Locke, Jin offers little to the other survivors and often seems unwilling to participate in the group at all. Because of his inability to communicate in English, dramatic camera shots are often used to depict Jin's life on the island and the frequent use of flashbacks offers further context regarding his life prior to the plane crash, which helps to deepen his character. However, the content of the flashbacks and the additional advantage of the accompanying subtitles only benefit the audience.

Often Korean dialogue between the couple would go without subtitles, underscoring their foreignness and their difference, separating them from us as viewers as much as from the other islanders, and subordinating Jin and Sun to their fellow crash victims. As correlate to Jin's language

difficulties in particular, he became one of the show's sources for comic relief, as he would stumble through attempts to communicate with others.

(Gray 225-226)

For instance, soon after the plane crash, Jin catches fish and other seafood and offers to share the raw food with the other survivors. He approaches a character named Hurley to offer him some of his catch. Hurley laughs and tells him, "I am starving, but I'm nowhere near that hungry," and laughs again. Undeterred, he continues on and is especially insistent that Claire, then eight months pregnant, eat some raw sea urchin. He uses gestures and points to her stomach to try and communicate that this particular food will be good for the baby. Out of politeness, she tastes a small piece. Immediately, she feels a kick for the first time since the plane crash. Up until this moment, she had been concerned at the baby's lack of movement. Overwhelmed, she grabs Jin's hand so he can feel the kicks with her. Embarrassed, Jin tries to pull away and averts his gaze away from her. Meanwhile, Claire, oblivious, insistently holds his hand to her belly. Jin's language difficulties may be read as humorous to some viewers, but these moments of "comic relief" produce their own uncomfortable tensions. While Jin is centrally involved in such moments, he is not laughing *with* the others, but is being laughed *at* by those around him. Part of what may makes his character humorous is precisely the other characters' lack of understanding of his background, which his flashbacks reveal to be quite dark.

The minimal subtitling of the island scenes, especially in the first season, contrasts with Jin's flashbacks to his life in Korea, all of which are fully translated. The prominent lack of subtitling in the characters' scenes on the island and the full translation available in the flashbacks are both used for dramatic effect in key moments in this

episode. Primarily due to the amount of time devoted to Jin's flashbacks in this particular episode, "... In Translation" was the most heavily (though unevenly) subtitled *Lost* episode aired at that point in the series.

"... In Translation" begins with an extreme close-up of Jin's eye, echoing the show's opening shot of Jack's eye. This becomes a familiar way to begin episodes throughout the series: "the show's continual use of flashbacks, each week from a different person's perspective, and its common trope of beginning episodes with close-ups of characters' eyes, drew the viewers' eyes to the issue of *perspective*" (Gray 233). The camera's focus on one specific character early in an episode often signals that the episode will be intercut with flashbacks from that particular character's past. Following the close-up of Jin's eye, a series of cut-away shots and eyeline-match cuts situate Jin, standing alone on the beach, looking around and then out onto the water. The serenity of Jin's solitude in this opening scene is quickly disrupted, cutting to a flashback of Jin's first time meeting Sun's father.

Jin has requested a meeting with Mr. Paik in order to ask for his blessing to propose to Sun. This scene, lasting just a minute and a half, consists primarily of Jin standing uncomfortably and self-consciously in an impressive office, while Mr. Paik sits behind a desk, harshly interrogating Jin while distractedly signing papers. Already giving very little of his attention to Jin, upon hearing of his more humble background as the son of a fisherman, Mr. Paik seems to further dismiss Jin as a potential match for Sun. Jin says he is willing to do anything for Sun, at which point Mr. Paik looks up, interested, and asks if Jin would work for him and really do whatever he asks. When Jin says he would, Mr. Paik stands up to shake Jin's hand. Receiving Mr. Paik's approval allows Jin

to realize his more immediate goal of marrying Sun. However, ironically, his new professional obligations to his father-in-law, which allow him to be with Sun, quickly put a strain on their marriage. While an earlier episode, “The House of the Rising Sun” offers some background to Sun and Jin’s troubled relationship, it focuses on Sun’s perspective. This flashback of Jin’s first meeting with Sun’s father in “. . . in Translation” is significant, as it is the first to offer any background information about Jin, from his point of view. What is perhaps even more striking is that this scene is fully subtitled. Without the inclusion of subtitles, it would have been quite difficult for non-Korean speakers to understand this scene, as it is primarily driven by Jin and Mr. Paik’s dialogue.

Coming out of this memory, the camera cuts back to the island, where Jin notices Sun approach the water in a bikini. In an earlier episode Jin had scolded Sun for wearing a cardigan with the top button unbuttoned. He is horrified to see her now, showing significantly more skin. He hurries to cover her with her towel, embarrassed and angry that she would wear something so revealing. He begins to yell at her in Korean. His first two lines are subtitled: “What are you doing? Are you out of your mind?” In contrast to the fully translated scene that immediately preceded this one, only the above two lines of Jin’s are translated. However, with the premise of their argument having been established, the changing tones of Sun and Jin’s voices and Jin’s clearly struggling to cover Sun up and to pull her away from the beach all give some indication as to what they are saying. At one point during their struggle, Jin pulls too hard and too quickly on Sun’s hand, and she falls down on the beach. Another character, Michael, rushes over to intervene, yelling in English, “Hey, get your hands off of her!” Jin responds angrily in Korean. Michael and Jin exchange words and begin pushing each other, with Jin’s words

remaining untranslated. While neither of them understand what the other is saying, their intent seems pretty clear.

This positions Sun, Jin, and Michael in the trope of “the sexually alluring and available Asian and Asian American woman with the villainous and therefore undesirably Asian and Asian American man,” which has been tiresomely repeated over decades of American film, television, and literature (Ono and Pham 64). While the show dispels any romantic possibility between Sun and Michael, Michael often voluntarily steps into the role of protecting Sun from Jin. However, in this beach scene, before his fight with Jin escalates further, Sun slaps Michael and pulls Jin away by the hand, walking away from Michael and the growing crowd of onlookers. Jin pulls his hand away from Sun’s and looks back at Michael, while Sun continues walking, alone, without looking back at either of them.

Michael has had a history of conflict with Jin. Early in the first season, in an episode entitled “House of the Rising Sun,” Jin attacks Michael, unprovoked. Jin and Sun are both speaking only in Korean at this point, so they seem to have no clear way of communicating with Michael. When asked by the other survivors what he had done to Jin, Michael answers, “I didn’t do anything. ... In the United States, where I’m from, Korean people don’t like black people.” He attributes the unexplained tension between him and Jin to the racism that has historically been one of several sources of tension between black and Korean communities in America, particularly in large urban areas. Los Angeles, where Michael is from, has a history of such animosity. However, these specific racial tensions may not have been immediately familiar to Jin and Sun, who had lived in Korea all their lives. Later in that episode, Sun finds Michael when he is alone and

reveals to him that she can, in fact, speak English, in order to explain, though not apologize, for Jin's behavior. She explains that Jin had been entrusted to deliver an important package by his father-in-law. The package included an expensive watch that Michael had later picked up on the beach. Seeing the watch on Michael's wrist, Jin has wrongly assumed that Michael had stolen it from him. Sun explains that for Jin "protecting the watch is a question of honor."

Jin and Sun are each cast in Orientalist stereotypes, in Jin's commitment to go to extreme lengths to protect his family's honor, and in Sun's own commitment to support Jin no matter what he does, regardless of her own personal feelings about his actions. As Michael Newbury notes, "Jin and Sun, when they move mentally back in time, are the captives of what I would like to call 1980s and 1990s corporate orientalism. ... [These instances] uniformly link imperialistic Asian corporate power to both the 'Orient's' feudal, disindividuated and militaristic past and to mysterious and brutal structures of Asian organized crime" (213). These portrayals are further reinforced in Jin's flashbacks in "... In Translation." They are eventually dispelled for Jin as his character is made more sympathetic. However, as the series continues, Sun's father becomes further villainized, in part, as a way to explain Jin's aggressive behavior as being uncharacteristic and as comprising a temporary episode in his life. At the end of "House of the Rising Sun," Michael returns the watch to Jin but angrily warns him (in English) to stay away from him. As a result of this incident, Michael inadvertently becomes one of Sun's few confidantes.

Later in "... Translation," after the incident on the beach, Sun finds Michael to explain that she had hit him to keep Jin from seriously hurting him and to dispel Jin's

ongoing (but unfounded) suspicion that there is something going on between Sun and Michael. Michael is in the final stages of constructing a raft that he had been building, as a means of escape off of the island, and is hard at work when Sun tries to talk to him. Still upset with the whole situation, Michael brushes off Sun's apology and tells her he plans to stay away from Jin, who is now "Sun's problem," as he reverts his attention to the raft.

This scene on the island then cuts to the first of several flashbacks that show the kind of work that Mr. Paik has in mind for Jin. These flashbacks, like the first, continue to present full translation for all of the Korean dialogue. Mr. Paik employs Jin as a henchman and sends him to violently beat, or even kill, people who have stood in the way of Mr. Paik's business objectives. Jin struggles to hide the nature of his work from Sun and to keep her from learning of her father's dealings in criminal activity. This becomes increasingly more difficult, as he is required to work longer and increasingly more unconventional hours, often on short notice. He reasons that the compromises he is making are temporary and that the sacrifices he is choosing to make, and those that Sun is forced to accommodate, will eventually lead to a more emotionally and financially stable future for the two of them. But before he has the chance to redeem himself to Sun, their plane crashes on the island. And at that point, Sun has already been taking English lessons for over a year and had been planning to leave him. She had planned to leave him in Sydney, right before they were scheduled to board their flight. Just as she noticed the car she had arranged to pick her up, in a rare tender moment, Jin surprises her with a single flower. This simple gesture reminds her of the early stages of their courtship. Sun hesitates before deciding to stay to try and mend her relationship with Jin. She boards the plane with him, which ends up crashing on the island.

Back on the island, later in the same day that Jin and Sun fought on the beach, news quickly spreads that Michael's raft is on fire. As the raft continues to burn, a large crowd forms around it. Despite attempts to stop the flames, it becomes clear that it will be impossible to salvage it. Looking around, Michael notices Jin's conspicuous absence and demands in English that Sun tell him where Jin is. Others intervene, still under the impression that Sun is unable to understand Michael. Sun runs away from the crowd and, meanwhile, Jin is nowhere to be found. The following day, Jin is discovered in the jungle with burns on his hands. He is beaten and dragged to the beach, where he is held by several of the other men for a crudely improvised trial. A crowd had only just begun to form around Jin, and Sun has not yet entered the scene. While Jin understands the accusation, he is unable to defend himself. Several of the other male characters quickly congregate on the beach around Jin, who has been thrown down into the sand. The others raise their voices, as some members of the group begin to grow physically violent both against Jin and against each other. The characters are all yelling at Jin and to each other in English. As Jin slowly and painfully gets to his feet, a series of eyeline-match cuts emphasizes Jin's vulnerable position in this escalating situation.

Jin responds to his accusers angrily in Korean saying "nahn ahniya" (난아니야; "It wasn't me"), which is not translated or subtitled. The (non-Korean speaking) viewer is situated in the position of most of the other characters, in their shared inability to understand him. All of a sudden, the heated conversation between the other characters becomes garbled. Jin's eyeline-match shots shift to focus on his ear in "what we may call the 'earline-match' cut, in which a character listens from outside the space of the scene. The assumption is that the sound travels in a straight line, which constitutes the axis of

action” (Thompson 57). The soundtrack consists of the other characters’ conversation played backwards to distort the sound—in effect, briefly shifting the focus to Jin’s inability to understand everyone else around him. In this way, the other characters’ voices are still recognizable and familiar, the pace of their speech seems natural, and the emotional tone of their voices is retained; however their speech sounds incomprehensible. This further underscores the linguistic distance between Jin and the other survivors on the island.

As Jin hears the other characters’ unintelligible conversation, an eyeline-match shot focuses on Sun who is approaching the already confused and tense scene. In untranslated and unsubtitled Korean, Jin asks her accusingly, “당신도 나를 못 믿겠어?” (Do you not believe me either?) The others grow quiet as Michael looks to Sun to ask her what Jin is saying. Again, while Michael knows that Sun understands him, the others, including Jin, do not. Meanwhile, Jin says to Sun, “nahn ahniya,” and turns to Michael to explain angrily and in Korean, that the raft had already been burning when he first saw it. He had burned himself trying to put the fire out. However, his lines continue to remain unsubtitled. Everyone turns to look at Jin, as Michael approaches him asking, “You say something to me?” Jin repeats, “nahn ahniya,” which Michael misunderstands as either an angry response or a taunting remark. He rushes to Jin and begins to punch him, perhaps with the intention to force a response from Sun. Notably, the communication seems to be happening in indirect relays, with one character speaking to another, but directing his words to a third.

Jin continues to explain himself in Korean—albeit in a defiant, defensive tone—to which Michael persists in responding with physical violence. As Michael readies himself

for another punch, Sun screams “Stop it!” in English, surprising everyone, including Jin. She finally intervenes in this conflict, but in doing so, she discloses to the group that she can speak English. After a moment of shocked silence, the other characters begin to ask, understandably, why she had not let them know that she could communicate with them all this time. Ignoring everyone else’s questions, she turns to Michael to translate what Jin had said. When Sun translates Michael’s questions for Jin, her Korean remains unsubtitled. Earlier in the same scene as well as in preceding episodes, one immediate effect of the lack of subtitling is that it estranges Jin and Sun and further alienates them from the rest of the survivors. In this scene, the function of the deliberate lack of subtitles shifts, as subtitles are made unnecessary by Sun’s own translations of Jin’s Korean. While Sun’s making herself available to translate between Jin and the other characters solves the immediate problem they were having in communicating with one another, Sun’s having kept her language skills a secret from everyone makes her seem untrustworthy, diminishing her credibility as a moderator of this (or any other) conflict.

Sawyer calls her a liar and Michael remains unconvinced that he can trust Jin. While Sun attempts to translate and moderate Michael and Jin’s conversation, Jin refuses to respond directly to her. Through Sun’s mediation, everyone—including Sun—learns that Jin was actually the first one to notice that the raft was burning. He had actually burnt his hands in his attempts to extinguish the flames. Once this immediate crisis is resolved, Sun is left to answer for her deception. Everyone initially responds by walking away from her. As the crowd disperses, no one engages Sun or Jin in conversation and eventually, the two of them are left alone on the beach.

This scene replicates several key elements of Jin's earlier confrontation with Michael: Michael yelling at Jin, Jin's angry responses in unsubtitled Korean, the physical violence between Michael and Jin, Sun's intervention, and her physically reaching out for Jin. However, this time, as Sun turns to Jin, even he turns away from her. Her continued attempts to keep her language abilities a secret and her eventually disclosing this secret had both been motivated by her desire to protect Jin, as well as their fragile relationship. Her admission that she can speak English alienates Sun from everyone else, which actually conforms to Jin's initial wish for Sun to keep a distance from the other survivors. However, in the end, Jin also walks away from her, leaving her standing by herself on the beach.

A Revival of the Pyonsa in *Lost*

During this makeshift trial, as the only bilingual speaker of both Korean and English, Sun is faced with the undesirable choice of either allowing Jin to remain vulnerable at the hands of the angry crowd that is growing increasingly violent, or to reveal that she can, in fact, speak English and to risk losing the trust of everyone else on the island. At the point when the others have discovered Sun's ability to speak English, her direct translation of Michael's English and Jin's Korean eliminates the need for subtitles. In this way, she directly steps into the role of the pyonsa, the Korean narrator of films during the Japanese colonial era. Her role benefits both the audience within the show, comprised of the characters watching the drama unfolding between Jin and Michael, as well as for the television audience watching the show itself. The historical figure of the pyonsa offers an important precedent for the character of Sun, as she serves

the practical need of translating between different parties who would not be able to communicate (as quickly, or at all) otherwise. However, in voluntarily taking on this responsibility, she puts herself in a difficult position. Not only was she translating between English and Korean for different communities of language speakers, she also needed to negotiate her own complicated relationship with her husband, while responding to and managing others' changing perceptions of her.

The Korean term “pyonsa,” meaning “narrator” or “speaker,” is used exclusively for performers who had put on live, individual performances at film screenings, and especially for foreign films. The pyonsa is an important figure in the history of early Korean cinema. The same Chinese characters comprising “pyonsa” are used in the Japanese term “benshi” and the Chinese term “benzi,” which describes narrators in Taiwan, which also had been a Japanese colony in the early twentieth century. The task of the pyonsa went beyond just providing translation. “The *pyon*’sa performances were more than narration. The most effective performances added emotion and excitement to onscreen events that produced a fervor hard for modern audiences to imagine” (Baskett 22). These performances connected the audience members’ film viewing experiences to their individual personal, political, and emotional experiences. The work of the Korean pyonsa was always a difficult one, as this tradition emerged during the Japanese colonial period. The pyonsa’s responsibilities grew increasingly more complicated with the growth of the Japanese film industry, the increasing importation of American and West European films (though at different times the Japanese placed certain restrictions on imported films to protect their own growing film industry in East Asia), and the development of Korea’s own domestic film industry. The pyonsa often had to negotiate

between his professional commitments to film theaters, codes of conduct imposed by the colonial government, and the nationalist concerns of his countrymen. These disparate expectations were often at odds with each other.

The tradition of the pyonsa, benzi, and benshi emerged as a response to the need for translations of foreign films that were being imported into Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. As films—particularly American and European films—increased their reach into a greater number of foreign markets, film translation techniques developed in a number of ways. “Producers, distributors, exhibitors played with a variety of methods for their translation, just as they took varying stances in regard to the task of the translator” (Nornes 91). Subtitling and dubbing are the two methods that are most commonly used today. The strategy of producing multilanguage versions of films—which often consisted of using the same set for multiple casts and crews who each produced the same film in different languages—was a third option that emerged, but ultimately proved too prohibitive for most studio budgets. For example, Tod Browning directed the American version of the film *Dracula* (1931) during the day, while George Melford used the same set to direct a Spanish-language version of *Drácula* (1931) at night with a separate cast of actors (Nornes 137). A fourth translation strategy involved the live narration of a performer who would stand to the side of the screen and perform throughout the screening of the film, as in the benshi, benzi, and pyonsa.

This fourth strategy resembled, in part, the performances of voice actors in the silent film era, who were staged behind the screens in the auditoriums to perform the characters’ voices. These live readings proved ineffective due to often-poorly prepared scripts, as well as the high cost of each staged reading. The practice of the benshi, benzi,

and the *pyonsa*, in contrast, typically involved a single narrator who would stand to the side of the screen but would remain visible to the audience. The differences between the voice actors and the narrator were considerable. The presentation of just a single narrator (as opposed to that of multiple performers) allowed him individual license to freely translate as he saw fit. Further, as he remained visible to the audience throughout the entirety of the film screening, his bodily gestures became an integral part of the film viewing experience.

Rather than reading from a prepared script, the narrators often wove background explanation, personal interpretation, and other flourishes to their performances. As Ick-dal Kim explains:

The *pyonsa*, or *benshi*, in Japanese, were a group of men in the unique profession of providing translations of the dialogues. Though there was no way of knowing whether the *pyonsa* were carrying on any faithful translations, audiences were easily moved by the mesmeric power of their eloquence and enthusiasm. (387)

In many cases, these narrators offered more than linguistic translation, exceeding and deviating from what the film presented. They domesticated these foreign films for their home audiences and created new meanings as informed by their personal tastes and interpretations.²³ “The same film was sometimes radically different from *benshi* to *benshi*. Outside of the [Japanese] capital, the performances were even delivered in dialect. Most radically, the more powerful *benshi* could reedit films to suit their particular needs” (Nornes 115). Their performances in local dialects demonstrate interest in

²³ Here and in other instances in this paper, I follow Lawrence Venuti’s use of the terms “domesticate” and “foreignize” in his *The Translator’s Invisibility*.

providing particular domesticated, and more easily accessible translations for specific audiences, who spoke different languages and dialects, and who may have had different sets of cultural references. Some of these narrators became celebrities in their own right and their performances drew audiences as much, or sometimes even more, than did the actual films themselves.

The Film Explainer, a novel based on Gert Hofmann's childhood recollections of his own grandfather, presents Karl Hofmann and his engagement in film narration in the Apollo Theater, then, the only film theater in Limbach, Germany. The book begins by chronicling the end of Karl Hofmann's career as a film explainer due to the waning interest of the residents of his economically depressed town and to the coming of sound film, amidst the growing presence of the Nazi Party in Limach. As Herr Theilhaber, the manager of the Apollo Theater, reduces Hofmann's work schedule, Hofmann begins to fill the increasingly longer stretches between his days at the theater with long monologues on film to anyone who will listen. His audience consists primarily of his grandson, Gert. These monologues are, by turns, reflective and defensive about cinema and about Hofmann's own diminishing career.

Hofmann explains how his film explanations are a necessary component for a complete film viewing experience: "Because each one of them has to be made up by me, they don't grow on trees, you know.' The style of the other film explainers, even in big cities ... They are either too prompt with their explanations – before the picture – or too slow – after it's gone – so that between what you see and what you hear . . . you can't find the connection" (2-3). Like the pyonsa and the benshi, "[Grandfather] stood, so as not to get in the way of the film, beside the screen, and started to talk about the scene in

question. ... Grandfather, with his bamboo stick, showed it on the screen. That way the scene was there twice over: To hear and to look at” (40). Hofmann’s engagement with film, especially in the transition from silent to sound film, is made more complicated when the Nazi Party encroaches on Limbach. The evolution of film, Limbach’s growing Nazism, and Hofmann’s personal relationships are alternately trying and enjoyable for him.

In this same time period, in ways not unrelated to Hofmann’s own situation, the growing import of foreign films during the period of Japanese colonization complicated the work of the Korean *pyonsa*. Michael Baskett relates one such instance of a *pyonsa*’s performance during the screening of a foreign film in Korea, featuring a fight between a Western boxer and a Japanese Judo wrestler. This screening was held in 1912, just two years after the start of the Japanese colonial period, for an audience comprised of Japanese and Korean viewers. “The *pyon’sa*’s passionate oration was a key factor in polarizing the audience into two factions: Koreans, who supported the Western boxer, and Japanese, who supported the Judo wrestler” (21-22). The forced seating arrangement further solidified their support: the Japanese viewers sat in chairs on the balcony and the Korean audience members sat on the ground level on cushions. In the end, the Judo wrestler won. As it turns out, the film had intentionally been screened for the pedagogical purpose of “educating” the Koreans, to encourage them to support the Japanese colonial presence.

The film sparked an anti-Japanese sentiment, and the Western boxer’s losing the fight set off a riot between the Koreans and the Japanese, which included the throwing up

of cushions, the throwing down of chairs, and further physical violence as the fights continued outside the theater. Korean critics Lee Young-il and Choe Young-choi note:

Japanese films were predominantly shown, however, moviegoers preferred Western films. ... Moviegoers preferred Western movies partly out of [a] strong sense of nationalism against Japanese colonization and in view of the fact [that] Western films were more artistic and entertaining than Japanese. (22)

While the aesthetic tastes of the (presumably Korean) moviegoers characterized by Lee and Choe may have been influenced by the authors' own sense of nationalism, this statement may also reflect the fact that the United States and Europe had enjoyed a longer period of cinematic development than had Japan.

This screening demonstrates an example of an intended domestication that had gone awry. Lawrence Venuti expresses a similarly critical opinion against the domestication of foreign texts, especially "in highly self-conscious projects, where translation serves an appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic agendas, cultural, economic, political" (18-19). The pyonsa's professional duties and relationship to the colonial government were often interconnected as "[t]he owners of all new theaters established after 1910 were Japanese with the exception of Dansongsa which was opened before 1910" (Lee and Choe 22). In the screening of the match between the Western boxer and the Japanese wrestler, the pyonsa is depicted as having made the "desirable" choice according to most contemporary cultural critics, as he had subverted colonial authority in siding with his fellow Koreans.

Interestingly—but perhaps, unsurprisingly—Sun is not always afforded the same sympathy by either the characters around her or by the audience (as guided by the narrative choices of the production process). While Sun is engaging in work that resembles that of the *pyonsa*, the reception of her work more closely aligns with that of off-screen translators of film. Nornes comments on the difficult position of these translators in early cinema, in his discussion of the distribution histories of specific films.

[T]ranslators in the silent film world were considered indispensable and at the same time despised. When their work attracted comment, it was for ridicule. For film studios, their contribution was an afterthought in the business of exporting product. For distributors and exhibitors, it was a convenient camouflage for censorship and a tool to ensure a return on investment through domestication and explication. (101)

In this context, the work of translators of silent film also closely resembles that of the legal interpreter in bilingual court cases, which are staged in a space similar to that of a theater.

Suzy Park, the protagonist of Suki Kim's novel *The Interpreter* considers her role in such legal proceedings, which also resonate with the expectations of the *pyonsa*:

The interpreter, however, is the shadow. The key is to be invisible. She is the only one in the room who hears the truth, a keeper of secrets. . . . Both sides need her desperately, but she, in fact, belongs to neither. One of the job requirements was no involvement: Shut up and get the work done. That's fine with her. Except it doesn't go as smoothly as that. Suzy often finds herself cheating. (12, 14-15)

Suzy “cheats” in at least two cases upon realizing that the non-English speaking small businessmen who have been brought to court had not been given adequate counsel for their case. In such instances, she steps beyond her role as a linguistic interpreter and discreetly offers additional advice in Korean, taking it upon herself to right what she sees to be an uneven plane. However, in doing so, she is violating her code of conduct, which requires that she maintain an impartial position in relation to the two parties represented in court. Her professional integrity is contingent on her impartiality. However, as the narrative continues, both her professional integrity and impartiality are challenged when Suki begins interpreting for a man who is familiar with the business dealings of Suzy’s deceased parents. The man does not know that the court interpreter is the daughter of this couple who were, at one point, his employers. As Suzy becomes, first curious, and then anxious to learn more about her parents, she temporarily derails the lawyer’s line of questioning to ask her own questions about her parents’ business dealings, which had been cloaked in secrecy while they had been alive.

Just as Suzy’s personal life is drawn into her translation work, neither can Sun isolate her translations (and bilingual abilities) from her relationship with Jin or with the others on the island. During Jin’s trial, Sun accurately translates between Michael and Jin. However, this instance of faithful translation follows an extended period of her hiding her bilingual speaking skills, which ultimately make her seem less trustworthy. As the only bilingual speaker of both Korean and English in their group, she alone bears the responsibility and burden of translating between these two communities of language speakers. In presuming translation to be a clear and direct exchange—rather than a

complex negotiation between individuals, languages, cultures, and social structures—the other characters do not understand Sun’s challenges with facilitating these conversations.

The protagonist in *The Interpreter* articulates some of these complexities: “Suzy knows it is wrong, to embellish the truth according to how she sees fit. In fact, she will be fired on the spot if anyone discovers that her translation harbors a bias. But truth, she has learned, comes in different shades, different languages at times” (16). Interestingly, in these particular instances, Sun, Suzy, and the pyonsa’s access to languages seems more of a liability than an asset. Similar to Nornes’s discussion of film translators, Saúl Sibirsky and Martin C. Taylor note the challenges that court interpreters face in responding to conflicting expectations of “attorneys, court reporters, judges, social workers, and others. ... [A]n interpreter, however well prepared, whether blameful or blameless, will be confronting at times a hostile or certainly apprehensive attitude from other service providers” (13). The characters (and television audiences) of *Lost* need Sun to provide translations for them. However, their (and our) desire for specific kinds of translations puts Sun in a difficult position as she is, more often than not, unable to meet everyone’s expectations—primarily because fulfilling all of these multiple, and often conflicting, expectations would prove to be an impossible task.

While the producers of *Lost* likely did not have the pyonsa figure in mind as they developed Sun’s character, the pyonsa presents a useful model to more closely examine the specific cultural and linguistic negotiations that Sun must make. Further, as Jigna Desai notes: “According to Spivak, the diasporic woman is positioned by multiple nationalisms, contested citizenships, strained patriarchies, and the expansion of capital in the new nation-state” (27). The dual contexts of early Korean cinema and of the multiple

claims imposed on and claimed by diasporic women demonstrate that traces of history frequently emerge, and often inadvertently, in contemporary culture. Lisa Lowe argues that: “Culture is the medium of the *present* ... but it is simultaneously the site that mediates the *past*, through which history is grasped as difference, as fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction” (*Immigrant Acts* 2). This has been especially true in the portrayal of Asian and Asian American figures in American literary and cultural production. Part of the reason that these “fragments, shocks, and flashes of disjunction” occur is that rather than accounting for, or even incorporating historical circumstances, in their narratives, many literary and cultural works enact selective *erasures* of history.

Lost is a prime example of such an erasure, as it is set on an island, which is presumed to have had no prior inhabitants, and therefore no known history. In presenting a large, diverse cast of characters on this seemingly pristine island, the show suggests that these multiethnic and multinational characters can construct a “post-national” or “post-racial” community. “The utopian vision of a multinational, multiracial, cross-class contemporary community, in short, is one in which the crucial markers of national, racial and class difference are subordinated to or erased by a sense of common purpose in battling the white past” (Newbury 206). As Michael Newbury continues his discussion, he explains that, if anything, the shared history (and shared language) of the characters establishes the show’s focus on America’s past and its presumption of an American future, in which each of the characters—regardless of their national affiliations—emerge as assimilated Americans.

Heterotopia *Par Excellence* and Blank Screens

It is unlikely that the creators of *Lost* had any intention to or interest in harkening back to the history of early cinema, much less the history of Korean film. In fact, when the island and its newest inhabitants are first introduced, they are presented as *de*-historicized entities. Following the trauma of surviving the plane crash and being separated from or losing loved ones, the characters are presented with the opportunity to start new lives without having to account for past losses, disappointments, or mistakes. Tellingly, the first titled episode, immediately following the untitled pilot episode, is called “Tabula Rasa.” Early in this episode, two of the characters on the island individually stumble upon a mug shot of Kate, one of the survivors. Kate’s flashbacks reveal that she is an escaped fugitive on the run. She was finally caught in Australia by a U.S. Marshall and was in his custody, in handcuffs, when the plane crashed. Kate finds the Marshall’s keys to unlock her handcuffs before she meets any of the other survivors, and the Marshall dies from a shrapnel wound three days after the crash, presumably giving her a chance at a new life without her criminal past haunting her. At the end of this episode, Kate approaches Jack to confess what she had been charged with. Jack responds, “I don’t want to know. It doesn’t matter, Kate, who we were, what we did before this, before the crash. . . . We should all be able to start over.” Most of the survivors did not know one another prior to the plane crash, which allows them to decide how much of their past lives they may want to share, and how truthful they should be, on this seemingly pristine and isolated island.

In the first season of *Lost*, the island’s mysterious qualities frustrate the characters’ attempts to locate the island’s (and their own) exact geographical location.

The island seems to exist outside of known national boundaries, and its distance from recognizable landmarks is indeterminate.

[T]he island is unknown and unnamed ... it is set in a ‘no man’s land’, a geographically vague location whose very indistinctness encourages the fantastic imaginations of viewers the world over. *Lost* is thus rooted in an ostensibly de-territorialised space not coterminous with any geographically known or precise topography – if territorialized land is acquired through acts of sovereign jurisdiction, de-territorialised space seemingly lacks organised division. In short, this mystery island is a visionary or utopian space – beautiful, lush, ‘virgin territory’ waiting to be explored – that appeals to the tourist imagination and forms the basis for pleasurable immersion in a much wider cross-media and globalised phenomenon. (Stringer 75)

An uncritical reading of the island would celebrate its “virgin territory” and the opportunity for anyone to use it to establish his own version of utopia. The characters initially approach this island with such an uncritical view, presuming that the island is uninhabited, that it has no prior history, has not already been claimed by anyone else, and that its resources are available for anyone to enjoy. As the series continues, of course, none of this turns out to be the case.

The survivors’ expectations of idyllic island living are disrupted by violent encounters with the island’s other inhabitants, discoveries of remnants left behind by others who have long since passed away, and confrontations with groups and individuals who are struggling for control of the island from abroad. In many ways, there are strong

parallels between the struggles over this fictional island and those over the islands of Hawai'i, where the show is filmed. In fact, as the survivors begin exploring the island, they come across evidence of conflict between the different factions of the island's former inhabitants. "These artefacts [a slave ship on which dynamite is found and heroin on a plane that has crashed] offer physical proof that new nations emerged on the island, not as a result of civilised exchange and cultural cross-fertilisation, but because of imperial domination through war and myths of moral and religious superiority" (Bernier 248). Such conflicts had already started brewing among the survivors of the plane crash and these tensions deepen as the show continues. To further complicate matters, in the midst of these struggles both on and off the island, in the fourth season of the show, the survivors are surprised to learn that the island can travel through space and time.

Michel Foucault's discussion of heterotopia offers a useful theoretical frame to think through the island's idyllic qualities, shifting spatio-temporality, and seeming placelessness. Contrasted against utopias, which Foucault defines as "sites with no real place ... [that] present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down," heterotopias are "real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (24). Foucault speaks, in particular, to the singular attributes of examples of heterotopia *in motion*: "the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea ... The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*" (27). Already drawing from familiar castaway narratives,

sailing narratives, and from the science fiction genre, the revelation of the island's ability to travel through both time and space further attributes to it the characteristics of a boat or a ship. Whereas places are typically described within "a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another," heterotopias are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (23, 25). This may happen when multiple claims are simultaneously made on a single space.

Such is the case with the island in *Lost*, as the various characters—the survivors, the island's other inhabitants, and others off of the island—all approach the island as de-territorialized, "a place without a place," and as "virgin territory." The indeterminate location of the island on the world's map and its perception as de-historicized does not erase the characters' constructions of identity. They still self-identify and respond to one another as members of specific national, cultural, and linguistic communities. In fact, in certain ways, the characters' misguided conception of their being the island's first inhabitants further reinforces their cultural differences.

The island's treatment as something of a "blank slate" is similar to the ways in which Sun and Jin are viewed by other characters, both on and off of the island. Just as the island is de-historicized and too hastily cast in the familiar trope of the deserted island, Jin and Sun's characters are similarly appropriated by others' varying expectations of them and others' own anxieties about race and culture. In her introduction to *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe notes that: "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” (18). What makes the figure of the Asian immigrant legible as a blank “screen” plausible is the decontextualization or separation of the Asian immigrant from her own personal history, as well as from larger historical circumstances that would have made possible (or necessitated) her migration to America.

Laura Hyun Yi Kang extends this discussion in her own study of representations of Asian and Asian American women in American culture:

The bodies of Asian women . . . bear a promiscuous range of affliction. While *they* (a collocation of like anatomies) render an inanimate, blank screen onto which meanings can be readily projected by some other cultural agent, *they* (a class of multiple ideological subjection) are effaced from some other point of view even as *they* (a three-dimensional depository of cultural meanings) house an interiority that is vulnerable to certain intrusions from elsewhere. (*Compositional Subjects* 71)

While Sun is confronted with a number of racist and sexist stereotypical presumptions, including even some that are well-intentioned, her character presents an interesting example of the “inanimate, blank screen.” Sun seems very much aware of assumptions that others may make about her and uses them, at times, to her advantage.

Initially, it is easy for Sun to hide her English language abilities because no one expects her to be able to communicate in English, which is, in and of itself, problematic. Michaela D.E. Meyer and Danielle M. Stern argue that this reveals one of many cultural assumptions that are introduced and, later further complicated, in the show: “we are shown that white American people assume that neither Sun nor Jin can speak English

simply because they are Korean and are speaking Korean to each other” (318). Meyer and Stern critique the stereotypes commonly associated with Asian characters in American film and television, “including the belief that Asian people cannot speak English and that Asian women are subjugated as the ‘demure housewives’ incapable of personal knowledge” (313). As they focus on the character of Sun, they note that “[a]s the first season progresses, Sun challenges these stereotypes for the white cast members and establishes herself as useful and resourceful” (313). Their generous reading of Sun focuses on the ways in which the show’s narrative moves beyond essentialist understandings of people of color and of women, and yet, their reading limits the complexity of Sun’s character.

Meyer and Stern’s critique about such American stereotypes focuses on the portrayal of Sun in the middle of the first season. Interestingly, they do not discuss a scene at the very end of the first season, for which their critique would be absolutely relevant. In the first of the two-part sequence comprising the season finale, “Exodus,” a flashback shows Jin and Sun at the Sydney airport. Sun had just gone to pick up sandwiches and coffee. After she sits down, she leans over to spread a paper napkin on his lap and begins cutting their sandwiches as Jin continues reading his newspaper. A woman sitting nearby quietly, but audibly, says to the man next to her, “If you ever catch me doing anything like that for you, shoot me.” He replies, “Don’t knock it. Their divorce rate is twenty times lower than ours.” Sun overhears and looks up at them. In her distracted state, she accidentally knocks coffee onto Jin’s lap. Sun and Jin stand up hurriedly, both dabbing at his clothes. As he rushes off in search for a restroom, the woman says, in a less inhibited tone, “My God, it’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* come to life.”

The man, in a slightly softer tone, whispers, “Hey ... volume.” The woman says, “Relax ... they don’t speak English.”

Meanwhile, throughout the entirety of the first season, the other survivors on the island demonstrate a much more subdued response to Jin and Sun. At most, the others make restrained comments in passing to one another about Sun’s relationship with Jin, and about her extreme deference to him. For the most part, the other characters observe them with curiosity, interest, and, at times, concern. However, they refrain from making overtly racist or sexist comments about Jin and Sun’s relationship. Their close and constant contact with Jin and Sun may discourage them from too explicitly expressing such thoughts, directly contrasting with the notably casual and uninhibited manner with which the woman in the airport comments on Sun and Jin’s exchange.

While the woman in the airport and the rest of the survivors turn out to be wrong about Sun’s English-speaking abilities, Sun is not completely innocent in allowing them to sustain these assumptions, as Meyer and Stern seem to suggest. Soon after the plane crash, when Michael first approaches Sun to ask her a question, she responds in Korean, saying, “저 영어 못해요” (“I don’t speak English.”) and gestures an inability to understand him. In doing so, she simultaneously gives some indication to Michael (who cannot speak Korean) that she is unable to communicate with him, while ensuring that Jin (the only other Korean speaker present) hears her saying so. In this way, both Michael and Jin are affirmed in thinking that Sun does not understand English.

After the dramatic scene on the beach in the episode, “... In Translation,” Jin separates temporarily from Sun, and finally begins to engage with others on the island. Towards the end of the episode, Jin approaches Michael, carrying bamboo on his

shoulder, and says a single English word: “Boat,” and Michael accepts his help. This marks Jin’s first English language exchange with another character. He begins with monosyllabic words and simple sentences, but by necessity, he eventually becomes comfortably conversant with the other survivors. “... In Translation” ends with Sun finally enjoying the beach in her bikini, but alone. In solitude, and especially in her separation from Jin, she is finally able to freely speak and dress as she desires. While she cannot always choose the situations in which she finds herself, she ultimately grows more confident in her choices within them.

As the series progresses, Sun and Jin eventually reconcile and settle into a happier relationship. Later in the series, by the end of the fourth season, an opportunity emerges for a select number of the survivors to leave the island by helicopter. Sun leaves the island, but Jin is unable to get on the helicopter in time. Midway through the sixth and final season, Sun has successfully returned to the island but has not reconnected with Jin as of yet. She is living with a number of the original survivors, who have been working to keep a dangerous character, who is referred to as “The Man in Black,” from leaving the island, while also helping Sun find Jin. They have appointed a man named Richard to lead the expedition.

In the midst of their search, early in an episode entitled, “The Package,” the Man in Black approaches Sun. As she runs away from him, she hits her head on a low hanging branch and falls unconscious. When she wakes up, she finds herself unable to speak English, though she has retained the ability to understand others speaking it. She finds her way back to the group where Jack diagnoses her as having temporary aphasia, which explains her particular memory loss, and assures her that she will be fine. At this point,

Richard joins the group and begins hurriedly packing a bag while explaining his plans to destroy a plane on a nearby island to contain The Man in Black's movements. Sun interrupts his speech in an emotional outburst, in Korean. She vehemently opposes his plans. She reaffirms her principle objective to find Jin—not to save the world from the Man in Black—and protests against Richard's plans to destroy what seems to be their one way off of the island. Sun's lines in this scene are subtitled, making them accessible to the viewer, but not to any of the other characters.

Elements of this scene are reminiscent of those in the trial scene in "... In Translation." In both "... In Translation" and "The Package," the emotional drama is heightened by frustration and confusion resulting from the characters' inability to communicate. Further, in both of these episodes, the rising drama is interrupted, or momentarily set aside, as other characters raise questions about Sun's language abilities. As a result, both episodes continue in a confusing series of attempted exchanges in which characters seem to be either speaking over each other, or ignoring each other completely. In the earlier episode, when Sun interrupts Jin and Michael to help mediate their conflict, other characters understandably respond more immediately to the surprising revelation that she can speak English, rather than to the content of her words, which temporarily halts the attempted resolution between Michael and Jin. Sun ignores the others' questions in order to explain Jin's burn injuries to Michael. Michael asks further questions to Jin directly. Sun translates them for Jin. However, Jin, like the rest of the crowd, is stunned to learn of Sun's English-language abilities and does not answer her. Meanwhile, Michael mistakenly takes Jin's silence as an admission of guilt. In this scene, the speakers each

fail to incite a response, or to even receive acknowledgement, from the person with whom they are attempting to communicate.

In “The Package,” when Sun speaks directly to Richard, she intends for her speech and actions to incite the group to join her in helping her find Jin. However, the others around her are unable to understand what she is saying. For Richard in particular, who has just rejoined the group, there are two sources of confusion. He does not understand *what* Sun is saying and he does not yet know *why* Sun has lost the ability to speak English. He proceeds to ask about the latter, and in choosing to pursue that line of questioning, the plot, again, stalls. He turns away from Sun to ask everyone else why Sun is not speaking English. Jack speaks for Sun, explaining that she had hit her head while running away from The Man in Black. At this point, Richard turns back to Sun to ask her about her meeting with The Man in Black. She ignores this question and continues to explain why she refuses to help him to destroy the plane. At one point, she points to another character, Ilana, to include her in the conversation. Ilana, unable to understand Sun and unsure how to respond, says nothing. Sun directs a few choice words to Richard again before she storms away from the group.

At this point, only the television audience has the benefit of understanding what each of the characters are saying. While in the show’s earliest episodes, most of Jin and Sun’s lines in Korean are untranslated, by the final season, all of their Korean dialogue is subtitled. This shift allows the audience to account for all aspects of the narrative and also to be more inclined to sympathize with Sun. At the same time, this also seems to simplify or diminish the characters’ frustration with untranslated language. Ultimately, in both instances (and in many others), the responsibility of translation or making oneself

intelligible falls to Sun. However, she seems unable to do so without the help of Locke and Jack. In "... In Translation," Locke helps temporarily resolve the tense situation between Michael, Jin, and Sun by suggesting that the survivors have been too quick to cast blame within the group, when they know that there are a number of other inhabitants on the island who have been actively and deliberately causing them harm. In "The Package," it is Jack who explains her aphasia to Richard and later approaches Sun with a pad of paper and a pen so she has a way to literally make herself legible to the others. Both of these episodes end with Sun becoming more assimilated into the group, through the intervention of white male protagonists.

Lost begins with an idealistic portrayal of how people of different backgrounds and experiences can come together after a shared traumatic experience. Many critics have celebrated this particular message of the show.

Lost has proven to be a rare instance of a US primetime drama set outside the USA. ... while *Lost* has been guilty of dividing the world into binaries of Orient and Occident, ultimately 'home' exists outside this binary, as do the island and its inhabitants. For a primetime US television programme to offer such a message – or for any television programme to offer such a message, for that matter – represents an intriguing step forward towards a post-national television. (Gray 238)

However, not all critics share such an optimistic reading of the show. Michael Newbury counters Jonathan Gray's reading of *Lost* by emphasizing

how profoundly *national* this imagined racial community is. The survivors of *Lost*, become, through their persistent contrast with the Others, less a

transnational community and more an idealized sign of the USA's complete racial tolerance in a post-cold-war world, an instalment in the ongoing and utopian myth that the USA tells itself (and the world) about its presumptively nonracialized and nonimperialistic essence.

(Newbury 206)

Of course, the show's having been produced in the United States constitutes one factor as to why it centralizes America amidst its multicultural and multinational cast. The anticipation of a largely American audience is another factor. However, the show's increasing popularity in international markets has complicated the show's focus on America. The South Korean market is particularly interesting to consider, especially in the reception of Yunjin Kim and Daniel Dae Kim's portrayals of Sun and Jin.

***Lost* in South Korea**

Soon after *Lost* began airing in South Korea, Hyo Jin Kim conducted a study of the reception of *Lost* among South Korean viewers. In 2006, she held interviews with Yunjin Kim's manager, the producers who aired the *Lost* episodes in Korea, the managers of the two most popular Korean *Lost* fan sites, and the Korean voice actor for Hurley, one of the show's principle characters. Hyo Jin Kim notes that the episodes were aired in South Korea about three months after their initial airing in the United States. Two companies had produced two distinct versions of the show, one which dubbed the English dialogue, and other which aired the episodes with subtitles. The Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), which is the largest television network in South Korean, dubbed its version of the *Lost* episodes, which aired on its network channel. They had edited some

of the episodes to account for language and for cultural differences. CJ CGV, the largest multiplex chain in South Korea, aired *Lost* episodes with Korean subtitles on their cable network, and otherwise made no other changes to the show (Hyo Jin Kim 55).

As complex as the multilingual format is in English, it becomes even more complicated in the Korean versions. The Korean production teams likely could not have anticipated certain plot twists, a few of which required more explanation than either subtitling or dubbing technologies could have allowed while keeping pace with the show. Thus, at certain points, KBS was unable to replicate the same narratives presented in the original American episodes. For instance,

[Won Suk] Suh, the dubbing producer, explains how different and difficult it is to dub *Lost*. He states the most difficult thing to dub [are] the conversations [between] Jin and Sun, and other English speaking characters [as] Jin and Sun are not supposed to understand English during the first season. ... Suh states that [the] KBS producing team have a hard time [in deciding] how to describe miscommunication with language barrier in [their] dubbing system. Finally [the] KBS producing team decide[d] to remove the scene[s]. (Hyo Jin Kim 56-57)

From the start of the show, KBS had decided to leave Sun and Jin's dialogue intact, as performed by Daniel Dae Kim and Yunjin Kim, but to hire voice actors for the remainder of the characters (Stafford 43). Initially, as Sun and Jin had very little contact with the other characters, this did not present any complications. However, as they become more involved with the rest of the group, and it becomes clear that there are significant

language barriers between the Korean and non-Korean characters, it became more difficult to reproduce these tensions in the Korean dubbed versions of the *Lost* episodes.

Despite these complications, the show gained a considerable number of South Korean fans, largely due to Yunjin Kim's role in the show. Before playing Sun, Yunjin Kim had emerged as one of South Korea's newest stars. Born in Seoul, Kim had immigrated to the United States at the age of ten with her family. She received formal dramatic training in New York, Boston, and London, after which she secured small roles in American television and theater productions. However, it was not until she began to audition for South Korean productions that she began to land leading roles. She was cast in two Korean television drama series in 1996 and 1998, before landing a starring role in the film *Shiri* (1999). Upon its release, *Shiri* broke box office records and has since been acknowledged as the first Korean blockbuster of new South Korean cinema. The success of *Shiri* propelled Kim's own career in South Korean cinema and television.

When auditioning for *Lost*, Yunjin Kim had originally tried for the role of Kate. ““You know, the role [of Sun] didn't exist before I met with J.J.,” she explains. “He thought it would be interesting to have a Korean couple on the plane, but only after we met. So that's really flattering”” (Stafford 44). While other characters were also developed on the strength of actors' auditions, no other characters required the kind of language fluency that Sun and Jin's characters required. Their scenes on the island, as well as their extended flashbacks set in South Korea, also necessitated some level of cultural fluency in the writing of these particular episodes. As mentioned above, many South Korean viewers were disappointed that Sun and Jin's relationship initially appeared to be either anachronistic or stereotypical. Yunjin Kim also expresses similar

views: “It’s not my ideal of a relationship. It started out being very stereotypical in the beginning, and I was concerned about that. You know, Korean men are not like that anymore. That was back in the 1950s” (Stafford 44). Kim goes on to explain that this did, however, allow for both Sun and Jin’s individual characters to develop in more positive and complex ways.

Daniel Dae Kim also comments on the portrayal of his own character, but primarily in response to the criticism of viewers of the show.

Many Asian viewers felt the character of Jin was simply reinforcing racial stereotypes of Asian men. ... “Initially, I was stung by it,” he said. “I rejected a lot of roles that were one-dimensional and put Asian-Americans in a bad light, so to receive the amount of criticism I did when the show came out, was hurtful.” (Stafford 113)

Daniel Dae Kim then echoes Yunjin Kim’s optimistic view. As the show continues, his character becomes more fully developed. “The mail has been really positive,” Kim said as the show entered its second season. “I think it was the fact that you got to see a lot of different colors. He wasn’t just this overbearing, domineering husband” (Stafford 113).

However, the later justification does not adequately answer why the show needed to begin with such stereotypical portrayals of Koreans in the first place.

Another issue with the portrayals of these two characters is their language proficiency. While Yunjin Kim is fluent in both Korean and English, the character of Sun speaks English with a pronounced accent. Similarly, Daniel Dae Kim speaks in accentless English but his character spoke only Korean in for much of the first season, and his English is heavily accented.

Kim's Korean was extremely rusty, a hurdle he had to quickly overcome, since the character he played would communicate only in Korean.

To help create a realistic portrayal, Kim's costar on *Lost* – Yunjin Kim, who plays his wife and is fluent in Korean – coached him on his delivery.

Even then, Kim found his accent was incorrect for the character of Jin.

(Stafford 112-113)

There are multiple levels of irony in this situation. Yunjin Kim had begun her acting career in the United States, but she had difficulty finding consistent work in American productions. So she returned to South Korea, where she became a breakout star. During her *Lost* audition, she had to explain her acting credentials and the work she had been involved with in Korea to J.J. Abrams, the co-creator of *Lost*. She is also often misread as a South Korean—as opposed to a Korean American—actor by viewers and fans. Her delivering Sun's lines in English with an exaggerated accent, makes her seem even more foreign. On the other hand, Daniel Dae Kim, whose character initially speaks only Korean, actually struggles with the language. While this makes for an interesting development in Jin and Sun's relationship, where suddenly Jin finds himself reliant on Sun, many Korean-speaking viewers find Jin's imprecise delivery of his Korean lines distracting.

Korean-speaking viewers have also commented on the writing of the Korean dialogue on *Lost*, especially in its first season. Not only did the quick timeline from the writing of the Korean characters to shooting the show's earliest episodes shorten Daniel Dae Kim's Korean language training, it also made it challenging for the producers to seek out the staff and resources to write convincing Korean dialogue for Sun and Jin. "This is

one of the reason[s] that the Korean language on *Lost* seems awkward to Korean viewers. After [the] first season, the production team hire[d] Korean writer, Christina Kim, to help better the fluency of the Korean language” (Hyo Jin Kim 52).

Jonathan Gray sees Jin’s portrayal as one written by, and potentially for, white American writers and audiences. “Here, knowing viewers could also appreciate the irony that Korean-American Daniel Dae Kim reportedly had to bone up on his shaky command of the Korean language for the role. Ironic, yes, but the resulting performance was thus clearly coded as one of an American aping a Korean character as penned by white American writers” (Gray 225-26). Kent Ono and Vincent Pham would characterize such a performance as implicit yellowface. If explicit yellowface is understood to be the portrayal of an Asian or Asian American character by an actor whose racial or ethnic background does not correspond to his or her character, “implicit yellowface involves both stage and social actors looking, sounding, and acting according to some notion of normatized, authentic standard of Asianness. ... Thus, implicit yellowface can mean when Asian and Asian Americans play any Asian or Asian American ethnic role other than the one with which they identify” (54, 46). In this particular instance, the Korean American actors Daniel Dae Kim and Yunjin Kim’s playing South Korean characters may seem a relatively slight difference, especially compared to more egregious examples of white actors’ portrayals of Asian characters in yellowface. Further, this is not to criticize Daniel Dae Kim’s level of comfort with the Korean language. My larger critique is that a character who speaks fluent Korean had been specifically written for an actor who does not have Korean fluency, by white American writers who also are also not fluent in Korean. There is an implicit presumption that Asian American actors should be

able to speak their ancestral languages, regardless of their actual lived experience.

Needless to say, this is not something generally expected of non-Asian American actors.

Daniel Dae Kim does speak to the amount of cross-racial and cross-ethnic performances that are asked of Asian American actors in American television and film. He is encouraged that for *Lost*, he had the opportunity to, at least, play the ethnicity with which he personally identifies. “For Kim, the idea of playing a Korean was a relief, after having played other Asian nationalities on TV and in movies” (Stafford 112). However, Lisa Lowe and others argue that when Asian Americans are confused for Asians from Asia, this perpetuates one of the most persistent stereotypes of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, who are deemed unassimilable to American society. While many are encouraged by increasingly diverse representations of characters in American and international media, this nominal diversity does not necessarily offer a wider diversity of roles for non-white actors. In fact, such superficial representations of diversity may blind both producers and viewers to the fact that these productions may actually reinforce existing negative stereotypes. “Indeed, transnational films, global television, multilingual websites, and cross-cultural exchanges of information via e-mail have the potential to ‘exoticize’ those outside the mainstream United States media, make them appear intriguing, but also curious, strange, and alien to us, and, thus, underscore differences *not* similarities” (Ono and Pham 4). While Yunjin Kim and Daniel Dae Kim are both American, their characters in *Lost* are not and their characters’ foreignness is repeatedly underscored throughout the series. The expectation of Asian American actors to play characters who speak accented English is one that has persisted for over a century, to many critics’ and audiences’ frustration.

Finally, aside from the issues concerning Yunjin Kim and Daniel Dae Kim's language fluency and accented performances, the expectation that Sun and Jin's characters would not understand even the most basic English phrases is surprising and problematic. Joseph Sung-Yul Park notes that, as has been the case with many other countries around the world, "Korea has been in heavy pursuit of English for over half a century, and English has permeated many aspects of Koreans' lives as a symbol and vehicle for globally circulated cultural forms and ideas" (30). This is evident in South Korean print media, film, television, and especially in Korean contemporary music. Many young pop artists take on English stage names and often mix English lyrics into their songs.

Further, a basic level of English language proficiency is necessary to pursue academic and professional opportunities in South Korea. "When one takes the college entrance examination or seeks employment or promotion, English is the single most important area in which he or she must do well in order to succeed" (Park 1). Sun had graduated from Seoul National University, the most competitive school in South Korea, with a bachelor's degree in art history. It is extremely unlikely that she would not have had some form of English language training in order to even be admitted to this school and that she would not have encountered any English over the course of her entire liberal arts education. Of course, such educational opportunities, as well as the necessary resources that would support such pursuits, are not equally available to all. Jin's background, having grown up in a more rural part of South Korea in financial hardship, makes it more credible that he would not be fluent in English. However, during his time

working in an international hotel in Seoul, Jin would likely have needed to demonstrate at least a minimal ability to speak and understand English to be hired in the first place.

The role of the English language continues to be a hotly contested topic in South Korea. Critics of South Korea's growing reliance on the English language express their concern that English perpetuates "[class] inequality, materialistic opportunism, a betrayal of one's cultural heritage, and a self-abasing longing for American culture" (Park 2). Others argue that proficiency in English is necessary for Korea to be competitive internationally. "As of 2008, English is taught as a mandatory subject from elementary school (3rd grade) to high school," in order to ensure that children can build a foundation for English language learning from an early age (Park 34). With all of these formal and informal ways in which South Koreans are exposed to the English language, it is unrealistic that Sun and Jin's characters would not have at least a minimal proficiency in English, and for this to be the premise on which so many of their conflicts are based.

While the show's producers and writers planned for specific aspects of the characters' and the island's histories to complicate the narrative, they likely did not anticipate that the traces of other histories external to the fictional world of the show could also inform it. As mentioned above, in order to help to represent the Korean elements more accurately on *Lost*, Christina M. Kim joined the staff of writers in the second season and stayed on through the fourth season. Experts were also consulted to stage Sun and Jin's flashbacks. The viewers who continued watching the show were able to see how the portrayals of Sun and Jin became less stereotypical and more rounded. Jin's Korean improved significantly and both Sun and Jin's characters became proficiently bilingual, though they continued to speak in accented English. In the end,

Sun and Jin's characters comprise mostly positive representations of Asians in mainstream American media. However, this did involve a number of initial missteps and the development of these characters took place over a period of six years.

Since the last season of *Lost*, Yunjin Kim has continued working in South Korean cinema and has a starring role for an ABC drama series, *Mistresses*. Daniel Dae Kim has been actively working in American film and television, now most well-known for his starring role in the reprised *Hawaii-Five-0*. Yunjin Kim and Daniel Dae Kim's successes are encouraging for aspiring actors, as well as for audiences looking for greater inclusion of non-white characters in American film and television. However, not all television shows will have the longevity that *Lost* enjoyed and not all actors will be able to replicate Yunjin Kim and Daniel Dae Kim's success. As Kent Ono and Vincent Pham argue, in addition to working for greater inclusion within mainstream media, artists should strive for "*media independence*, independence from the mainstream, dominant, corporate, and sometimes capitalist influences" (113). Despite working with a more constricted budget and limited resources, working on an independent production allows greater autonomy for directors, writers, producers, and actors. The following chapter examines two such examples, *West 32nd* and *In Between Days*, as it further explores some of the topics raised in this reading of *Lost* and also introduces different ways to approach multilingualism in film.

Chapter Four: Correspondence and Calligraphic Textuality

The feature-length independent films *In Between Days* and *West 32nd* are relatively modest in scale, especially when compared to *Lost*. While *Lost* is a television production, it more closely resembles a big-budget blockbuster film than either *West 32nd* or *In Between Days*. However, it is the independent nature of these more modest productions, their smaller casts, and their centralization of the Korean language make the interrelated concerns of language, culture, and translation even more immediate to the audiences of these two films. As such, these films manage to avoid many of *Lost*'s initial stereotypical portrayals of Korean language and culture. In Marie-Aude Baronian's discussion of the role of Armenian culture and language in *Girl From Moush*, she notes that "'Armenianness' is not depicted as an exotic decorative element; on the contrary, the exoticism is felt by the viewer when he or she realizes the foreign 'untranslatability' of those visual signs" (225). The depictions of "Koreanness" in *In Between Days* and *West 32nd* are similarly nuanced and complex, in contrast to the ornamental quality of some of the depictions of Korean language and culture in *Lost*.

In Between Days and *West 32nd* present intimate portrayals of Korean immigrant communities in Toronto and New York, respectively. The dialogue in *In Between Days* is almost entirely in Korean, with accompanying subtitles. So Yong Kim, the writer and director of *In Between Days*, shot the film entirely with a handheld camera and her soundtrack is composed of only diegetic sound. Michael Kang, director of *West 32nd*, and his co-writer, Edmund Lee, also wrote a significant amount of Korean into their script, but the majority of the characters' dialogue is in English. While the Korean language is less prominently featured in *West 32nd* as compared to *In Between Days*, what is notable

about this film is its selective use of subtitling for the Korean dialogue. Kang and Lee deliberately play with subtitles in this way to highlight the protagonist's lack of fluency with the Korean language.

In their attention to language, So Yong Kim, Michael Kang, and Edmund Lee examine how characters rely on different languages and communication technologies in their attempts to connect with one another, albeit with varying levels of success. As the two films progress and relationships between characters deteriorate, the protagonists strategically use other characters' lack of language fluency against them and deliberately avoid phone calls, text messages, and postcards in order to establish distance, which ultimately exacerbates crises in dramatic ways.

Both *In Between Days* and *West 32nd* were produced in North America and had anticipated primarily English-speaking audiences, many of whom would not have been fluent in Korean. The ways in which the films play with text, language, and such obstructions in communication between characters are all instructive in considering the anticipated audiences' engagement with the films themselves. This raises several questions: How does one engage with untranslated speech or text? What other tools or resources are available in the absence of translation? If a translation is not immediately available or possible, what is the point of including untranslated speech or text? These films importantly suggest that complete accessibility is not necessarily the primary objective, nor is it always desirable. Notably, all of these questions also privilege the perspective of and anticipate the response of the presumably non-Korean speaking character or audience member. While these films do not present clear responses to these questions, this chapter examines the meanings that can be constructed when focusing not

just on the perspective of the non-Korean speaker but also on that of the marginalized Korean, and further, not just on the viewers' expectations, but also on what the films themselves can offer.

West 32nd and *In Between Days* are examples of what Hamid Naficy would describe as accented cinema, as these films are produced by “diasporic or exilic subjects ... [whose] accent emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters—although that is a part of it—as from the displacement of the filmmakers and their artisanal or collective production modes” (“Epistolarity and Textuality” 133-34). Further, as is the case for many accented filmmakers, Michael Kang and So Yong Kim “operate independently, outside the studio system or the mainstream film industries, using interstitial and collective modes of production that critique those entities” (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 10).

Naficy's discussion of accented cinema also pertains to the relays of communication that are attempted within the films themselves. The diasporic experiences of the directors and the film characters, and the modes of communication depicted in the films all call attention to the “tensions of marginality and difference. ... The variations among the [various accented] films are driven by many factors, while their similarities stem principally from what the filmmakers have in common: liminal subjectivity and interstitial location in society and the film industry” (*An Accented Cinema* 10).

In Between Days and *West 32nd* explore various ways in which the films' protagonists experience shifting subjectivities and locations, often in relation to their involvement with their respective Korean communities. Many of the characters in both films rely almost completely on the Korean immigrant community for work and friendship. A few others

are able to comfortably navigate both in and outside of these Korean communities. Finally, *West 32nd* portrays the sole character whose networks lie largely outside of Koreatown, who struggles to even gain entry into these communities.

Most immediately, the comforts, pleasures, and limitations that can accompany membership in Toronto and New York's Koreatowns are evidenced through the use of subtitles in both films. Subtitling is generally considered to be "successful" when it inconspicuously facilitates the audience's comprehension of a film. Consequently, when subtitles catch one's attention, they seem to disrupt the viewing experience. In *West 32nd* and *In Between Days*, subtitling repeatedly and deliberately calls attention to the ruptures of translation. Such interruptions in the films' narratives affect the characters in the films themselves, as well as the viewing experience for the audience.

One major obstacle, in many subtitled films, is that the pace of spoken language is often too quick for subtitles to consistently provide full, literal translations. "Out of necessity, subtitles must condense several lines of dialogue into brief textual snippets timed to the flow of images. This requires a skillful and economic translation of the original spoken words—one of several forms of translation that produces the accent" (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 122). There are many instances in which less skillful translations can result in humorous, confusing, or even offensive translations that deviate from the spoken lines. For example, Henri Béhar recounts the translation of a soldier's shouting, "Tanks, tanks!" into French subtitles as "Merci, merci!" (80).

Thus, the necessary economy of translation often follows formulaic approaches involving a team of film technicians and translators. Béhar explains the rules that govern how many characters of text can be printed per frame:

1 character per 2 frames, less than 40 characters per line (spaces and punctuation included), no more than 2 lines per subtitle, and never go over a cut, unless absolutely forced to. . . . The lines are then translated, adapted to conform to spotting constraints, and reconciled with the time codes. The subtitles are synchronized with the dialogue and action, and tested in simulation (a trial run, so to speak). Refinements are made—the simulation is actually the last rewrite. Eventually, the final text is laser-etched on the print. (81)

Beyond the technical constraints, which are considerable, Béhar then discusses the challenges of not only translating between two different languages, but also translating specific vernaculars across languages. For instance, in writing French subtitles for *Boyz n the Hood*, he translated Ice Cube's line "Five thousand" which "stood for 'Audi 5000,' meaning 'I'm outta here,'" for "Je me casse" (84). In *West 32nd* and *In Between Days*, in addition to the inclusion of both the English and Korean languages, characters also code-switch between Konglish, Korean slang, and American slang.

Further, there is the question of using subtitles to create a certain effect. As mentioned above, Edmund Lee and Michael Kang selectively include subtitles in *West 32nd*, precisely to highlight the protagonist's position as an outsider to New York's Koreatown, despite his identifying as Korean American. Lee and Kang had originally envisioned their film to not include any subtitles at all in order to underscore the protagonist's sense of isolation. However, the final cut of the film does include some subtitling, presumably as a partial concession to others' concerns regarding the audience's expectations for full translations of the Korean dialogue. Claire Denis speaks

to similar intents and frustrations of her own in an interview with Atom Egoyan about her film *Friday Night* (2002). Egoyan brings up a particular scene in which “you can barely hear the dialogue in French. But ... the subtitles made it absolutely clear what was being said” (72, 74). Denis explains that initially: “I was actually against that [the subtitling]. I asked the guy who did the subtitles if we could perhaps print them with one letter missing or one word missing—as artists, you know ... And he said that doesn’t exist in subtitles. Either we have subtitles or we don’t have subtitles” (75). The subtitle specialist working on *Friday Night* seems particularly concerned with the audience’s expectations of the subtitle’s function. As these examples suggest, subtitles (as with other elements of film) are a point of negotiation between facilitating the audience’s viewing experience and presenting a more complex filmic experience.

Among the most prominent features of subtitles is the way in which they necessarily become a part of the film’s composition on the screen. Hamid Naficy uses the term “calligraphic textuality” to describe the various kinds of titles that visually mark the film. “Multilinguality, which necessitates extensive titling, turns the film frame into a calligraphic page, contributing to the film’s overall accent” (*An Accented Cinema* 122). One such example is evident in the Korean calligraphy prominently featured in the opening of *West 32nd*. The film opens with a wide pan of 32nd Street in the heart of Manhattan’s Koreatown and its multiple stories of Korean businesses adorned with Korean language signage. The opening shot begins with an extreme close-up of “서울,” printed vertically, whose font mimics traditional calligraphy. It is actually a sign for a restaurant called “Seoul Garden.” However, in its presentation in the film, the shot is cropped to just include the Korean characters for “Seoul.” Here, “서울” ceases to

function as a sign for a restaurant, or even as a marker for a business located in the United States; rather it serves to solidify a connection to the South Korean city after which the restaurant is named, emphasizing the reach of the Korean diaspora.

While only viewers who can read Korean will be able to literally read the characters for “Seoul,” the cropped shot, the calligraphic text, and its vertical orientation all highlight the foreignness of this text, and these elements all help to “authenticate” the Koreatown experience upon which the film relies. The Korean characters on the restaurant’s sign certainly “contribute to the film’s overall accent,” despite—or in another sense, directly in response to—the non-Korean speaking viewer’s inability to read the text. The close-up of the untranslated Korean characters is a fitting opening to *West 32nd*, as the first five minutes of the film is almost entirely comprised of untranslated Korean dialogue. Michael Kang and Edmund Lee’s interest in limiting the use of subtitles in their film is evident in that the first English subtitle is not presented until three minutes into the film.

In Between Days demonstrates similar interests in playing with language, text, and accent. However, as all of the Korean spoken lines in the film are fully subtitled, the tension lies less in the inaccessibility of untranslated language and focuses more heavily on the challenges that the protagonist, Aimie, faces in attempting to connect with others within the film itself. The acts of reading and of writing figure prominently throughout the film, as the relay of personal correspondence—both sent and unsent—signal the evolution of Aimie’s relationships with other characters in the film. As in the case of *Lost*, *In Between Days* similarly echoes early cinema’s experimentation with titling to engage with calligraphic textuality and multilingual conversations.

Epistolarity in *In Between Days*

While *Lost* recalls the continued use of technical camerawork of early cinema, *In Between Days* more directly comments on early cinematic titling, especially in its opening sequence. The soundtrack begins against a dark screen, consisting of a soft, rhythmic crunching sound. As the soundtrack continues, the film's title fades in, in white text against a dark screen. The title stays on for a brief moment, and then fades out. In both instances, the wipe moves horizontally from left to right, in the direction of reading English text, calling attention to the practice of reading itself. As the primary spoken language in the film is Korean, reading becomes a necessary practice for most audience members to access this heavily subtitled film. After the text of the title "In Between Days" fades out, the rhythmic sound continues against the black screen. The first still image and the first sound both precede the first moving image by ten seconds. The deliberate ordering of the concurrent text and sound, followed by the moving image, recalls early cinema's sequence of the intertitle presented concurrently with the playing of the film's soundtrack, followed by the moving image.

The first moving image of the film is a close-up of Aimie's face, framed by the fur-lined hood of her winter coat. She is walking on a flat, snowy expanse. The falling dusk, her downward gaze, her hood, the grainy film, and the jerkiness of the hand-held camera all make it difficult to make out her face exactly. Aimie's dark coat and the shadows across her face contrast starkly against the wintry background that looks almost bleached of color. Toronto's cityscape is set far back in the distance, slowly receding as Aimie walks away from the city center. This distance is emphasized by two rows of poles

along which run long electric wires toward the horizon. The cloudy sky is tinged with shades of pink, blue, and gray.

The following scene depicts the same distant cityscape, though as seen from an even more pronounced distance. Aimie's voiceover suggests that the film is shot from her line of sight. It seems she may now be looking at the cityscape through the window from inside her home. However, the lack of the framing of a window—or any other structural detail—makes Aimie's location in relation to this view indeterminate. This image of the skyline stays on the screen for about thirty seconds, during which the first spoken lines of the film are heard. Aimie is dictating a note in Korean to her father, describing her and her mother's transition to their new home. She tells him that she has made a lot of new friends and assures him that she and her mother are settling in well. Her one-way correspondence with her father recurs throughout the film, offering the audience further insight into Aimie's character. Aimie remains off-screen for the entirety of the scene, which remains consistent for all nine of the postcard scenes throughout *In Between Days*. “In some accented epistolary films, the ‘voice-over’ narration that contains the letters dominates the films’ visuals to the point that they may be called ‘image-over’ films” (Naficy, “Epistolarity and Textuality” 138). Such is the case in *In Between Days*, as Aimie's narration—the content of her “messages,” her vocal inflections, and the purported purpose of these words—holds greater significance than do their visual backdrop.

So Yong Kim describes these scenes as “the ‘postcard’ sections of the story.” Each of these sections is consistently set against a still image of the distant cityscape with Aimie's dictation of her “postcards.” The subtitling of the off-screen Aimie to her absent

father sets her words against still images, largely undisturbed by movement, aside from the slight tremor of the handheld camera. This is again reminiscent of the leader title of early cinema, as many of the postcards comment on the scenes that immediately follow. For instance, following her first postcard, in quick succession, are three different scenes in which Aimie is surrounded by her peers—in her school cafeteria, in her English language class, and in a video arcade. Aimie’s dictated postcard then sets up similar expectations as those of the title of early cinema that would “give away narrative point in advance” and may even “refer to actions that do not occur until well into the respective scene” (Hansen 45). However,

In an epistolary film it is sometimes impossible, without recourse to extratextual information, to differentiate with certainty between what is forged and what is real. Epistolary’s penchant for creating slippage and doubt must be viewed in the context of the doubling and resistive strategies that many exiles employ in both their lives and their art. For these reasons, epistolary is structurally a performative genre.

(Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 147)

The scene most immediately following Aimie’s first postcard shows the disingenuousness of what Aimie tells her father. She sits alone in the school cafeteria, surrounded by others grouped together around tables in lively conversation. While the formal characteristics of the postcards in the film recall those of the intertitle, the deviation of the content of Aimie’s correspondence from her lived reality importantly call attention to the unreliability of communication, whether intentionally duplicitous or not. Postcards, in-person conversations, phone conversations, missed calls and voice mail

messages, further negotiations between languages, pauses, and silences all contribute to the ways in which *In Between Days* plays with and experiments with modes of communication.

These transitions between still and moving images in the film recall the history of the evolution of film titles. At the turn of the century, the popularity of leader titles quickly led to the development of the “spoken title,” or as Abé Mark Nornes calls it, “dialogue photographed” (94). Early in its development, some staunch critics had strongly opposed the expansion of the use of titles to interrupt scenes to capture characters’ dialogue. For instance, Nornes relates that: “In 1912, one [critic] wrote, ‘It is quite natural for the writer to begin the scene with a subtitle announcing the main incident of that scene, but the proper place for the subtitle is usually at a place just preceding the incident. I have seen many films made unintelligible by this fault’” (95). This particular critic expresses concerns regarding the disruption of the aesthetics of cinema, as well as the accessibility of film to popular audiences. It should be noted that similar objections—regarding aesthetics and intelligibility—had also been raised when experimentation with sound film began, not too long after the emergence of the spoken title.

The rich compositions of text and imagery depicted in the first few scenes in *In Between Days* may be collectively read alongside these developments of early cinema. Following the film’s opening title sequence and the titling of Aimie’s first postcard to her father, the next two scenes—in the cafeteria and the classroom—are not subtitled, as all of the spoken lines are in English. Further, in these scenes, as the speaking voice is not always synchronous with the mouth of the speaker, such moments recall early cinema

prior to synchronized sound. The first such example is the off-camera narration of the first postcard scene. Then, in the cafeteria scene, the multiple conversations taking place around (but notably not including) Aimie are indistinguishable from one another. It is difficult to match the spoken lines to their speakers, much less to audibly pick out individual spoken lines or to visually distinguish individual speakers. In fact, the inability to extricate the individual from the collective murmurs and groups of people further underscores Aimie's isolation in an otherwise very social situation. As Aimie alternately looks down at her sandwich and then back up and around at students sitting around tables, chatting, and walking around, she seems curious about her peers but is also careful to appear disinterested in them.

The film then cuts to a close-up of Aimie's side profile as she sits in her English class. The grammar lesson on irregular verb conjugations and idiomatic expressions suggests that this class is designed for non-native speakers of English. The teacher's voice is the only one heard throughout the entire scene. In contrast to Aimie's own off-camera narration for the postcard scenes, in the classroom scene, the teacher is clearly visible and identifiable as the sole speaker. His authoritative position is reinforced by his professional dress, his standing at the front of the room, and his writing on the board, instructing the class. However, as the camera privileges Aimie's perspective, the only shot of the teacher is that of his writing on the whiteboard with his back facing the camera. Thus, this scene again dissociates the speaking mouth from the spoken lines.

However, the one point of correlation between the teacher and his speech is when he writes the word "save" on the board as he says it. "Save" is a part of a longer sentence that he presumably continues to write as he dictates it, but his body blocks the rest of his

writing. This simultaneous writing and speaking of the word “save” functions as a diegetic title and as a precursor to the subtitles that translate the Korean dialogue throughout the rest of the film. Notably, in this scene, the majority of the students in the class seems to be paying attention to the lesson and to be actively taking notes. This demonstrates the students’ response to and replication of the teacher’s having modeled this behavior on the board. The scene ends with a quick cut from the teacher’s own writing to Aimie’s notebook, where it is revealed that rather than engaging with the lesson, Aimie has been doodling, writing her friend’s name “Tran,” and drawing hearts in her notes. In this sense, the teacher’s writing almost seems intended more for the benefit of the viewer (and for the other students) than for Aimie. Given the significance that writing and written communication otherwise has for Aimie, it is notable that Tran is first introduced through Aimie’s writing of his name in this scene.

Tran, Aimie’s closest and only friend, and also the object of her romantic interest, is introduced in the following scene. The first subtitle of the film that also functions as a spoken title corresponds to Tran’s first spoken line. Tran and Aimie speak to each other only in Korean, with few exceptions comprised of English loan words that have entered the Korean vernacular. Tran’s comfort with both English and Korean is established early in the film, when he helps Aimie with her homework, correcting her spelling mistakes. His linguistic ability allows him to navigate a wider social network. However, Aimie is shyer and less comfortable speaking English. She relies on Tran to help her navigate her schoolwork, as well as social situations. Less confident in her speaking abilities, she demonstrates her affection for him through her engagement in a range of epistolary practices.

In an early scene, Aimie and Tran engage in a flirtatious conversation in which they elusively discuss the possibility of “doing it.” As the following scene reveals, “it” refers to Aimie’s giving Tran a tattoo. He eventually agrees to go through with it and they meet at his house. She heats a needle, dips it into the ink of a disassembled ballpoint pen, and draws an abstract design composed of a series of interlocked loops at the base of his neck. Soon afterward, they go to a party where Tran begins showing his new tattoo off to a group of other girls. When Aimie sees this, she avoids Tran for the remainder of the party. Her short-lived elation—that she had helped Tran get something that he wanted, and had contributed to making a permanent mark on his body—falls away to disappointment and jealousy that he is using his new tattoo to flirt with other girls.

A few days later he calls and wakes her up. He is panicked that his tattoo might be infected and he asks her to come over to look at it. She dismisses his concerns and takes her time in getting ready to leave the house. When she finally reaches him, upon looking closely at the tattoo, her face registers shock at seeing the blood and the infected skin. But she quickly composes herself and tells him, “It’s fine, you sissy.” Ultimately, the tattoo does not have the effect that either Tran or Aimie had anticipated. As a result, Aimie seems to be quickly distance herself from it. She continues to write his name when she’s alone, but in ways that would not leave such permanent traces. For instance, while riding the bus home, Aimie writes Tran’s name into the steamy inside of the window before breathing over it to cover his name back up.

As Aimie writes, traces, and inscribes her affection for Tran, she seems to also rely on the practice of writing to maintain her relationship with her father. In this way, without his ever actually appearing in the film, her father’s presence is made apparent

throughout the film. “[B]y addressing someone in an epistle, an illusion of presence is created that hovers in the text’s interstices. As a result, address is not just a problem but the problematic of these films” (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 5). It is unclear, however, whether Aimie actually puts these messages down on paper, much less sends them. As Naficy notes is often the case in epistolary narratives: “Letters stand in for those who are absent and inaccessible. ... letters not only link people who are separated but also remind them of their separation. In this, they act fetishistically, both disavowing and acknowledging the trauma of displacement” (*An Accented Cinema* 106). Despite his physical absence, her father remains very present in Aimie’s life, in spite of—or perhaps especially because of—his seeming lack of reciprocation of her attention and affection. Aimie’s off-screen dictation creates distance between her words and the print materials that would have been used to construct the postcards. Her off-screen dictation also distances Aimie from the messages themselves. The distant shots of the far horizon that accompany nearly all of the postcard scenes underscore the physical, and emotional, distance between Aimie and her father.

In *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Jacques Derrida collects a series of what he calls “correspondences.” In his discussion, Derrida himself encloses the term “correspondence” in quotation marks. The identities of the sender(s) and recipient(s) are unidentified, and their sending and receiving addresses remain undisclosed. “Who is writing? To whom? And to send, to destine, to dispatch what? To what address?” (5). These short, simple questions, which also linger in *In Between Days*, focus attention on each of the specific conditions that should make the sending of

postcards possible. In *In Between Days*, there is little in the film to offer any concrete answers.

An important point of contrast emerges about halfway through the film when Aimie accidentally comes across a piece of correspondence between two people she does not know. This more literal—and stable—example of postal epistolarity helps Aimie to better understand her own situation. Aimie finds this piece of mail while Tran is breaking into a car. Aimie is supposed to be looking out for any passersby. However, as Tran begins working the car radio out of the dashboard, Aimie quickly neglects her duties. Rather than keeping a watchful eye for any potential witnesses to their crime, outside of the car, she climbs inside and begins looking through its contents. As she is rummaging through the glove compartment, she finds a card that had been sent with photographs, including one featuring a man and a woman, smiling in their graduation caps and gowns. The card is signed and has a long personalized note. Most of the message is cropped out of the shot, but the end of the note remains within the frame: “I miss you so much. I can’t wait ‘til you get down here xxoo Anitra.” When Aimie looks up to see Tran stealing the radio, she tries to discourage Tran from going through it, but he brushes her off. As Tran leaves the car, slipping the radio in his jacket, Aimie pauses for a moment before she slips the card into her own jacket pocket and follows him. When she turns her outward gaze to the interior of the car, she ceases to be simply a passive participant to Tran’s crime and actively commits her own. However, one significant difference between these two acts of theft lies in that while Tran steals the radio presumably for its monetary value, Aimie steals the card for its emotional value.

It is significant to note that the intended recipient (presumably the owner of the car) had already received and had, likely, read the card, as evidenced by its envelope having already been ripped open along one side. As such, Aimie's violation is less in the disruption of the communication (which presumably had already been successfully delivered), but more so in interrupting the recipient's continual access to the card as a record of the personal communication. This is significant as this kind of physical record is exactly what Aimie desires but has been lacking from her father. She never receives any communication from her father in any form, written or otherwise. The ability to physically read and hold Anitra's card sharply contrasts with Aimie's own ephemeral voiced, but likely unsend, postcards.

Aimie's stealing Anitra's card is immediately followed by another "postcard" scene in which Aimie tells her father: "Dad, I want to show you this place," alluding to one of her favorite places in her neighborhood, an overhead pedestrian bridge above a busy street, close to the apartment she shares with her mother. When walking over this bridge, she often stops to look out at the traffic or at the sky. This postcard to her father and Anitra's card each focus on the sender anticipating a meeting with the card's recipient in the near future. Both of the senders call for the recipient to come visit, "here." Alternately, Anitra's card can be read as a ventriloquized response from Aimie's absent father, in which case the message is coming from "there." Imagining her father to still be in Korea potentially redraws Aimie's migratory route from the "there" of her homeland and the diasporic "here," as Naficy suggests is always the case with exilic epistolarity (*An Accented Cinema* 14).

Aimie and her father's inability to connect speaks to Naficy's comments on the impulse towards epistolarity, especially when communication between the parties is obstructed: "Another characteristic of epistolarity is that it is produced under erasure, for epistolary narratives invariably spring from an injunction or a prohibition against writing and connecting, which takes many forms" (*An Accented Cinema* 115). In the select examples Naficy presents, communication is restricted or denied due to censorship, trauma, or for political or financial reasons. In *In Between Days*, the reasons for Aimie's father's absence and for Aimie's inability to connect with him are neither similarly pressing nor is it immediately apparent.

The first conversation between Aimie and her mother that explicitly broaches the subject of her father's absence takes place about two-thirds of the way through the film. The two of them are home, sitting on the couch and for most of the conversation, they avoid direct eye contact.

"Aimie ... what do you think of having a new dad?"

"I have a dad."

"But he left us."

"Is that my fault?"

In the silence that follows, for the first time in this scene, the camera cuts to Aimie's mother. The camera is partially obscured as Aimie's mother gets up and leaves the room. Only then does Aimie finally look up at her mother, as she walks away.

The next scene featuring Aimie's mother comes up much later. She is applying mascara in front of the bathroom mirror and is noticeably wearing make up for the first time in the film. Aimie leans against the doorframe, watching her, and asks where she is

going. Whereas in the earlier scene, Aimie's mother looked at Aimie while Aimie looked directly ahead (seemingly determined not to look at her), through most of this later scene, Aimie looks at her mother while her mother looks directly ahead (to apply make-up, but perhaps also conveniently not to look directly at Aimie). Many of the elements of their earlier conversation is replicated in this scene, except that Aimie and her mother seem to have switched roles in terms of the line of questioning and the direction of their gaze. Their earlier unfinished conversation seems to continue in this scene, as her mother is clearly getting ready to go out on a date. Aimie asks, "Picking up some old fart?" She maintains a casual tone but seems intent in provoking a response. Her mother drops her hand and finally looks at Aimie directly. Having gotten her mother's full attention, Aimie says, "You look like a cheap whore with your make-up and clothes." Her mother slaps her. Aimie touches her face and looks up at her mother for a moment before the scene cuts.

In the final appearance of Aimie's mother, it is late at night. Aimie gets out of bed to investigate an unfamiliar noise. As she turns the corner on the bottom of the stairs leading into the living room, she sees her mother curled up on the living room couch, crying softly. When Aimie calls to her, her mother takes a moment to compose herself. She tells her not to worry and to go back to bed. This final conversation with her mother immediately precedes Aimie's final postcard to her father. After Aimie returns to bed, the film cuts to the city skyline at dusk to Aimie's voiceover: "I miss you so much ... but don't you miss me? ... Just wondering."

In the next scene, it is morning. Aimie takes out Anitra's card that she had stolen and looks at it for a long time, rereading it. The camera lingers on a close-up of the card,

allowing ample time for Aimie (and the audience) to read most of the handwritten message: “I’m so proud of Toby. Everyone is doing great, but they wonder where you are. I miss your smile. I miss you so much. Can’t wait ‘til you get down here. xxoo Anitra.” Most of the pre-printed text on the inside of the card is cropped out but the word “anniversary” suggests the card is meant to help to celebrate and remember a special day for the card’s recipient. Anitra and the recipient’s shared knowledge of an anniversary further reinforces their personal relationship as one that goes beyond celebrating national or religious holidays; rather, Anitra and the recipient of her card share a more intimate calendar marked by events of personal significance that only a close circle of friends and family would know.

As in the earlier pairing of Aimie’s and Anitra’s respective correspondences, elements of Aimie’s postcard resonate with the contents of the stolen card. Aimie begins by telling her father she misses him before asking, “But don’t you miss me?” This question is usually asked more for confirmation of the fact, rather than as a genuine question. Aimie’s evoking the word “miss” echoes the note in Anitra’s card: “I miss your smile. I miss you so much.” Notably, in Anitra’s card, the declarative statements—contrasting against Aimie’s interrogative sentence—assert how much Anitra is missing the addressee. Her message demonstrates confidence in her relationship with the card’s recipient, in strong contrast to Aimie’s growing insecurity about her relationship with her father.

This last postcard of Aimie’s closes with the phrase, “just wondering,” which seems to trail off. Generally, this phrase is usually spoken in a casual, offhand manner, or at least it is meant to sound as such. This is also why this phrase is more often spoken

than written. Committing this offhand phrase in writing further emphasizes—and also produces a record of—the asker’s potential anxiety, which he or she is actually attempting to conceal. In contrast, Anitra also communicates a sense of “wondering,” but her wondering, again, demonstrates a more grounded sense of her relationship with the card’s recipient. In fact, it is not even she who is doing the wondering, but everyone else: “Everyone is doing great, but they wonder where you are.” While “everyone” else wonders where the recipient is, Anitra clearly knows, assuming that the card had reached its intended destination. Aimie slowly looks at the photographs again before slipping everything back into the envelope. She goes back to the underground garage and returns the card, securing it under the car’s windshield wiper.

Doubling Screens and Text in Noraebang

As Aimie’s increasing emotional distance from her father manifests in the tone of her postcards, her deteriorating relationship with Tran is evidenced in the songs she sings in the two noraebang scenes in *In Between Days*. Noraebang is Korean for “karaoke” and literally translates as “song room.” As the term “noraebang” already includes the word “room,” it can refer to both the activity as well as the space in which the singing takes place. Noraebang bars and cafes are typically comprised of smaller private rooms, much like the Japanese “karaoke boxes.” These private rooms usually seat anywhere from two to twenty people, and are typically outfitted with couches, microphones, songbooks, a noraebang system, a remote control, a couple of tambourines, and a table in the center for food and drinks. Songs are most frequently sung as solos or duets. Meanwhile, the other noraebang patrons in the room can sing along, watch appreciatively, chat, or flip through

songbooks to add songs to the queue. Takumi Satō reflects on the mediation of the karaoke technology in this social activity and

call[s] such a style of interaction in the karaoke box “media-reflected communication” (Satō 1992). People watch the monitor which shows some visual image and lyrics, so each member of the group seems to be connected through it. There is little direct interaction among them. We can find a new relationship between body and medium in it. (Ogawa 48)

Whereas Satō seems to suggest that karaoke technology changes—and potentially obstructs—interactions between participants, in the noraebang scenes in *In Between Days* and *West 32nd*, this technology seems to heighten the already existent emotional drama between the characters. The intimate space of noraebang and the emotion-laden songs that are typically sung contribute to this effect. Further, the private form of epistolarity that characters enjoy in more direct forms of written communication (as in Aimie’s postcards to her father) are made public in noraebang, as song lyrics are publicly projected on television screens, visible to anyone in the room.

In one of the earliest scenes in *In Between Days*, Tran and Aimie go to noraebang, where Tran sings “Wherever You Will Go” by The Calling. Notably, this is the first instance in which either he or Aimie have English lines. Then, it is not until much later in the film that either of them actually speaks English in conversation. At the noraebang, Tran sings into his microphone in accented English but with confidence, especially during the song’s chorus: “If I could, then I would, I’ll go wherever you will go. Way up high or down low, I’ll go wherever you will go.” Aimie sings along more quietly into her

lollipop. The declarations of love throughout the song may seem optimistic, but they are all notably stated in the conditional tense.

In her friendship with Tran, Aimie maintains a fairly passive stance, often letting Tran decide how they spend their time together, when and how frequently they see each other, and generally accepting whatever attention he offers. As her feelings for him grow stronger, she struggles with whether she should try and continue to be easygoing to encourage him to develop feelings for her over time, or to be more forceful or calculated to encourage his reciprocation more quickly. Aimie and Tran do share a few moments in which the potential for romance is suggested, but it is never fully realized.

In the first noraebang scene, Aimie and Tran are playful and demonstrative of their platonic affection for each other. The assurance Aimie had felt in her friendship with Tran has significantly declined by the film's second noraebang scene, which occurs the night that Tran steals the car radio. On their way home on the bus, with the stolen radio tucked into his coat pocket, Tran asks Aimie to go celebrate. Aimie is still affected by Anitra's card and her involvement in this criminal activity and she declines. Earlier that day, one of their classmates, Michelle, had invited Tran and Aimie to a party at her house. Tran decides take Michelle up on her invitation, while Aimie goes home. After doing a number of household chores, Aimie decides to go to noraebang. Once there, she deliberates whether she should call Tran, decides against it, and puts in a song to sing alone. A brief shot of the television screen in the room shows that all of the text is in Korean. Aimie sings what sounds like a typical Korean pop song in its beat and its lyrics.

Its upbeat tempo continues, even after the song lyrics turn from the subject of love to that of loss.²⁴

As the film's closing credits reveal, the instrumental track is actually from the Icelandic Christmas song "Jolin Eru Koma," and further, the Korean lyrics had been rewritten by Jiseon Kim, the actress who plays Aimie. In fact, in setting the new lyrics to the music of "Jolin Eru Koma," the film presents a new compilation, which actually goes against general noraebang conventions. "Karaoke, by its very nature, cannot accept any new songs: a song must be known and famous to enter its world. It would make no sense to present a new song through karaoke, because karaoke is a container of what has been assimilated for a long time." (Prato 109). Though its sound and its presumed genre correspond to the kinds of songs that are popularly sung in noraebang, neither the song's melody nor Jiseon Kim's invented lyrics would be recognizable by most Koreans, Americans, nor by Canadians.

This breaking of karaoke convention marks the moment when Aimie's own character begins to dramatically change. Singing this song seems to have increased her confidence. She puts the microphone down, picks up her cell phone, and calls Tran. "I'm at Young's Noraebang. Get over here. Let's hang out." She typically does not assert herself in this way. The film only captures Aimie's side of the conversation, but Tran's response is clear from the visible disappointment in her face. She hangs up the phone and

²⁴ The Korean lyrics set to "Jolin Eru Koma" in *In Between Days*:

겨울이 되면 겨울이 되면	In the winter, in the winter
눈꽃이 내리고 눈꽃이 내리고	Snow flowers fall, snow flowers fall
너를보기위해 너를찾기위해	I go to see you, I go to find you
너만위해	Only for you
너의 애정위해 나의 사랑위해	For your affection, for my love
사랑 찾아오네 사랑 떠나가네	I find love, I find it gone
눈물 속에서도 눈물 속에서도	Covered in tears, covered in tears
너만위해	Only for you

leans back on the couch. The scene ends with the background noise of other noraebang patrons enthusiastically singing and chatting in nearby rooms, which makes Aimie seem even more alone.

Late that night, Tran calls to ask if he could stay over, as he had been kicked out of the house. She sneaks him in, hides him in her closet, and goes to sleep, excited about this new development. However, the next day, Aimie overhears Michelle offer him the use of a vacant room in her house. He thanks her and agrees to move in right away. That night, Aimie tentatively broaches the topic of her and Tran becoming romantically involved. She cautiously poses the situation in abstract terms. His response is similarly hesitant: "For me ... you've always been ... from start to end ... just a good friend." After a pause, Aimie walks away. Nursing her first major heartbreak, Aimie withdraws from everyone, including Tran. Tran calls repeatedly, leaving her concerned voicemail messages. She eventually begins to call him back, but similarly fails to reach him. The remainder of the film does not show them connecting again either in person, or even on the phone.

In the final scene of the film, for the first time she is wearing makeup, is dressed in a skirt, and she is wearing her hair down and carefully tousled. Aimie returns to the underground garage to look for the car from which Tran had stolen the radio in order to return Anitra's card. She secures it under the windshield wiper. In doing so, Aimie does her part in correcting the wrong that she and Tran had inflicted on the owner of the car in the underground garage. Her returning Anitra's card also seems to signal her accepting her father's potentially permanent absence.

She arrives at a house party and quickly finds the host, Steve. Tran sees her walk by with Steve, before the two of them disappear into a bedroom together. In ignoring Tran and seeking out Steve's company, she also finally accepts Tran's rejection. The change in her dress and behavior signal her concerted efforts to look and act more mature or, at the very least, older. In the final scene, Aimie and Steve are lying in bed, side by side, in the dark. Some of her lipstick has rubbed beyond the edges of her lips. Steve sits up to put on his shirt and offers to get them more beer. As Steve walks out of the room, the now open door shows Tran walking toward the room. Steve greets Tran as he begins to close the door behind him, inadvertently keeping Tran out.

The camera cuts to Aimie's face to the sound of the door firmly closing. She pulls the covers up to her eyes, looking out from under the covers toward a distant corner of the room. The film cuts to black before the closing credits roll to "Walk on the Moon" by Asobi Seksu. The ethereal instrumental intro provides additional texture to Aimie's introspective gaze in the final scene of the film. The lyrics and the breathy vocals that follow continue this quietly sad, meditative state.

I saw the photograph, an image of you
Things have never looked, looked like this
It's never been like this
I'm swimming in gray
I'm just swimming in gray

The first few lines of "Walk on the Moon" seem to allude to the near-stills of the postcard scenes, all of which depict the continually overcast skies and the gray expanses of snow

on the ground. Many of the outdoor scenes, and the majority of the postcards, are shot at dawn or dusk, casting a gray, grainy haze over much of the film.

However, unlike the photograph in “Walk on the Moon,” none of Aimie’s postcards include images of anyone. The absent landscapes comprising the film’s postcard scenes—and the more notable absence of Aimie’s father, throughout the entire film—is reminiscent of the absence of human voice in noraebang tracks. The etymology of the Japanese word, “karaoke,” is useful to consider here: “the term is an abbreviated compound of two Japanese words: ‘kara’, from *karappo* (‘empty’), and ‘oke’, an abbreviation for *okesutura* (‘orchestra’)” (Zhou and Tarroco 19). Noraebang and karaoke tracks are expected to *not* include the original singer’s voice, while leaving the instrumental track intact. “As implied by its Japanese etymology, karaoke opens up a void in both its visual and musical orchestration. There is a gaping hole in a karaoke video right where the vocalist’s visual presence and aural voice are expected to be. This empty space is to be filled with the karaoke performer’s own voice, body and soul” (Fornäs 118). However, in the postcard scenes and other such moments in *In Between Days*, these absences are not meant to be filled. Even in the physical absence of Aimie’s father, his presence in the film is evident; and despite Tran’s silences, the romantic drama heightens. As is similarly demonstrated in Jigna Desai’s reading of the film *Masala* (1992), *In Between Days* “suggests that in lieu of a resolution—a completion to the problems and desires of defining home within the displacement of global modernity—there are only disjunctures and contingencies in which diasporic subjects identify and disidentify” (131). *West 32nd* continues this intentional use of absences and silences to reveal its own disjunctures and contingencies.

Noraebang and Telephony in *West 32nd*

Noraebang, as a site of emotional and sexual tension, is even more pervasive in *West 32nd*, as much of the drama in the film takes place at Mama's, an exclusive noraebang club. Much like Young's Noraebang in *In Between Days*, the intimacy of the rooms at Mama's heightens dramatic conflict between characters, which are further mediated through technology (including cell phones, voicemail, and recording devices) and negotiated across multiple languages (Korean, English, and Chinese).

West 32nd seems to open on an optimistic tone, suggesting the possibility for various kinds of mobility for the characters: social mobility and professional advancement of the individual principle characters, as well as their ability to bridge cultural differences. Though all of the primary characters are of Korean ethnicity, as the film demonstrates, the differences between being Koreanized, Korean American, and Americanized can be stark, even while these characterizations are neither exhaustive, discrete, nor stable. The different physical spaces that are associated with the principle characters include Mama's in Manhattan's Koreatown; the residential area of Flushing; and finally, the main character's apartment and his neighborhood bar, which are both in Manhattan, but notably outside of Koreatown.

Later in the film, as the characters begin to meet each other less frequently in person, and instead depend more heavily on cell phones, landline phones, answering machines, and voicemails to communicate, their identification with these discrete physical spaces begins to become increasingly prominent. In fact, the characters seem unable to extract themselves from their seeming rootedness to these spaces. This reverses the initial widening of potential social mobility, physical mobility, and cross-cultural

exchange that is suggested in the beginning of *West 32nd*. Not only do the characters seem unable to extricate themselves from their current geographic locations and social positions, neither can they dissociate themselves from the murder investigation that has connected them before taking unexpected turns.

In the opening shot of *West 32nd*, the camera pans slowly across 32nd Street, busy with pedestrians and traffic. The streets are wet, reflecting headlights of taxis and illuminated signs of businesses, in bright saturated color. The film cuts to the interior of Mama's, which continues the flurry of color and activity. Patrons and hostesses are singing and drinking, servers are moving in and out of noraebang rooms with trays of drinks and appetizers, a woman is dancing on a table in a crowded room, and "Mama" is greeting guests at the entrance of the club. After greeting a roomful of patrons, Jinho Chun, the club manager, leaves this busy scene with a bag filled with a large amount of cash. He gets into his car, which is parked immediately outside of Mama's, and has just started to pull out of his parking spot when he is shot and killed by someone who had been waiting for him in the back seat of the car. The shooter steals the bag of money and is driven away in a getaway car that has just pulled up. The primary suspect is Kevin Lee, a fourteen-year-old boy.

John Kim, a young aspiring Korean American lawyer, seeks out Kevin's family, seeing this as an opportunity for advancement in his firm. Kevin's older sister, Lila, speaks for her family, as her brother is incarcerated and her mother is not fluent in English. John begins to depend on Lila for her knowledge of the case, for her connections to others in the Korean community, and, finally, for her language skills. As John grew up in a predominantly white suburb, he has a limited Korean vocabulary and does not have

many Korean friends, both of which seem more as a result of circumstance than necessarily by choice. Throughout his investigation, as John slowly gains entry into the Korean communities in New York, his personal investment in Kevin's situation grows.

Many of his meetings and chance encounters take place at Mama's over noraebang. Following Chun's murder, Mike Lee, a childhood friend of Lila and Kevin's, temporarily fills the role of manager of Mama's. It is while in this capacity that Mike invites John to go to Mama's. Soon after they arrive, John gets lost in the convoluted hallway and runs into Suki Kim, Jinho Chun's girlfriend. Suki is the sole witness to the murder. This is a fortuitous encounter, but both John and Suki are cautious about revealing too much of what they know, as neither of them knows of the other's interest in this case. Furthermore, the two of them are unable to have a very substantive conversation as John primarily speaks English and Suki primarily speaks Korean. While neither fully understands what the other is saying, John's English and Suki's subtitled Korean makes the entire conversation comprehensible for the English-speaking viewer.

While John and Suki are having this guarded conversation, Kyuc, a very recently promoted manager at Mama's, bursts into Mike's party room to throw Mike and his friends out of the noraebang. It is in this abrupt way that Mike learns that he has been replaced. John's conversation with Suki is cut short when he, too, is escorted out. Humiliated and angry, Mike attempts to regain his position to little avail. A few days later, he decides to change his tactics and calls John at his office to offer to help with the case, as part of an elaborate plan to right this situation his own way. That night, they return to Mama's. Kyuc bristles as soon as he sees Mike. Mike speaks to him in Korean and uses a respectful term, "older brother," to address him: "Hyung, don't worry. My

friend here is from Hong Kong. He invests in IT companies.” Of course, none of this is true, but John is unaware of what Mike has said about him. As they are led to their party room, Kyuc says a few lines in (untranslated) Chinese as if to see if they would respond. Neither Mike nor John turns around. While it is possible that they did not hear Kyuc, this feeds Kyuc’s growing suspicious of Mike.

Suki is one of two hostesses assigned to attend to Mike and John in their party room. Suki recognizes John right away and whispers that she needs to talk to him. Mike interrupts their whispered conversation, pulling her to her feet to sing a song with him, which she does, albeit unwillingly. Close shots of Mike singing the song, *내사랑 내곁에* (*My Love By My Side*), and his frequent glances to Suki suggest his romantic interest in her, while Suki looks sad and uncomfortable, clearly still mourning the loss of Jinho. Mike is suddenly called out of the room by a friend when Kyuc walks in. He speaks to John in (again untranslated) Chinese. John does not know how to respond. Kyuc switches to Korean, asking everyone around him, “Is he Chinese or what? ... He doesn’t understand Chinese,” all of which John still does not understand. Suki manages to get ahold of John’s business card before he and Mike are again kicked out of Mama’s.

Up until this point, the primary characters in *West 32nd* had relied on Mama’s as a central meeting place. However, by this point in the film, they each have established a variety of other ways to connect outside of the noraebang. “Electronic epistolary media, such as the telephone, answering machine, e-mail, fax, audiocassette, and videocassette, are widely employed [in accented cinema], resulting in fragmented, multifocal, multivocal, and emotional narratives” (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 104). Land-line phones and cell phones, in particular, figure prominently throughout—and especially

toward the end of—both *In Between Days* and *West 32nd*. The effects of telephonic exchanges in the films strongly contrast against those of the postcards in *In Between Days*. One significant difference between postal and telephonic epistolarity is that “[w]hile writing and receiving letters are characterized by distance, waiting, and delay, telephoning is instantaneous and simultaneous. Its live ontology obliterates spatial and temporal discontinuity” (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 133). The immediacy of a ringing telephone implicates the person on the receiving end of the call even before she even answers the phone, which recalls the above discussion of *Clay Walls*.

Extending and literalizing the Althusserian hail, Avital Ronell discusses the impossibility of not responding to the (telephonic) call: “You don’t know who’s calling or what you are going to be called upon to do, and still, you are lending your ear, giving something up, receiving an order” (2). While John had initially been an outsider to the Koreatown community, when he begins to receive calls from Suki, Lila, and Mike, he cannot *not* respond—not only due to the time-sensitive nature of their communication, but especially since he had been the one to initiate contact with all three of these characters. Even if John happens to miss any of these calls, temporarily delaying the receipt of the voicemail messages that are left, the moment he hears the recorded messages, he necessarily becomes involved in their situations. Even choosing not to act on the information he receives constitutes a deliberate action.

Soon after Suki takes John’s business card, she calls him and they set up a meeting in person. John asks Lila to join them to help with translation. The three of them meet at John’s apartment, where they sit at a bare kitchen table with just a recording device between them. The conversation begins with John asking Lila to translate his

questions for Suki: “Ask her to tell what she saw that night that Jin Ho Chun was murdered.” As Suki responds, Lila begins to relay Suki’s answers back to John, to which John responds with more specific follow-up questions. As Suki grows more comfortably talking to Lila, she begins to voluntarily divulge more information in longer stretches. Lila waits for natural pauses before translating for John. John begins to interrupt their conversations to ask further clarification questions. At times, Lila ignores John’s questions to allow Suki to continue talking, uninterrupted. As John loses his authority in this line of questioning, Lila steps into the privileged position of having all of the information that John and Suki each offer, while she selectively translates between them.

As Suki describes her account of Jinho’s murder, Lila is surprised to hear about the “young kid” who was involved. Up until this point, Lila had assumed that her brother had been wrongfully accused and is unprepared to consider that he may actually have been the one who had shot Jinho. Despite Suki’s attempts to continue telling Lila about the other details of that night, and unbeknownst to John, Lila repeatedly redirects her questions to find out more about the “young kid” that Suki had seen.

Suki: I didn’t get a good look at him, so I don’t know, but ... I think he used to be one of the kids that would come by with Mike. I heard that they arrested him.

John: What’s she saying?

Lila: (to John, switching to English) She said she saw Mike.

John: Yeah, I got that. There’s all this other stuff she’s saying.

Lila: She said she saw Mike. It was Mike and that he got out of the car and he took off. She was just describing it.

John: It was Mike?

Lila: Yes. It was Mike.

It is at this point that Lila realizes her potentially advantageous but conflicted position. When John asks Lila “What’s she saying?,” Lila pauses a little too long and braces herself before telling John that Mike was responsible for Jin Ho’s death. Not only does she step into the position of the *pyonsa* but her visual performance adds an added layer of narrative, which can be read as what Russell Banks and Atom Egoyan describe as “a personified subtitle”: “The actor chosen is, in a curious way, a personified subtitle to the script’s intention, giving the viewer access to a range of subtle emotions and hidden subtextual meaning” (37). The actor who plays Mike, Jun Sung Kim, notes in the film commentary that Lila both looks like she is lying while trying very hard to *not* look like she is lying. She is staging a performance that is intended to make her look sincere to John within the film, but guilty to the audience outside the film.

In the scene immediately following the (mis)translation, Lila has left the meeting with John and Suki, and is riding the subway home. She sits by herself, crying into her phone, clearly distraught. After some deliberation, she finally opens her phone to make a phone call. After a few rings, a male voice responds almost immediately: “Hello?”

“Mike?” “Lila?” Upon picking up, Mike immediately recognizes Lila.

The call, it would seem, tears into us with the authority of a suddenness, a resolute event which can neither be subjected to a will nor to a string of predictable determinations. The call, erupting as a kind of violence perpetrated against a destinal projection, is thus essentially out of control, arriving only to mark the out-of-handedness that befalls a planning “we

ourselves” (“we ourselves have neither planned nor prepared for nor voluntarily performed, nor have we ever done so”). (Ronell 32)

The scene cuts before we can hear the conversation continue. Regardless, it quickly becomes clear that Lila’s call to Mike has immediate harmful implications, primarily for John, but for Suki as well. As the film continues, the characters begin to keep greater physical distances between each other, and the temporal pauses between their phone calls grow longer. These physical and temporal expanses add further confusion as the narrative progresses and the drama escalates.

While John is still mistakenly thinking that Mike was solely responsible for Jinho’s murder, in his last attempt to connect with Lila, John calls to let her know that the case is progressing favorably for her brother. The film cuts from John leaving a message from his office phone to an extreme close-up of Lila’s home phone in her living room, with Lila in the background sitting on a couch and deliberately avoiding his call. As she listens, first, to the ringing telephone and then to the message John leaves on her answering machine, a slow rack focus shifts the viewer’s attention from the telephone to Lila. She is sitting with her legs pulled up, in the corner of the room opposite from the phone, as if to sit as far away from it as possible. The framing of this scene distorts the proportions such that the phone appears significantly larger than Lila. She does not move as she maintains a watchful eye (and ear) to the phone. Lila watches the phone from across the room as it rings and listens to the message John leaves on her machine in “real time.” In this scene, there is actually no discernable temporal gap between John’s sending and Lila’s receiving of this message, except in John’s imagination.

The centrality of the telephone in its various forms in *West 32nd*, as well as in *In Between Days*, demonstrates that

Unlike genre films, which use the telephone textually to drive the plot and to motivate editing choices, accented films engage the telephone more socially, symbolically, and magically to situate the diegetic characters' relationship to place (homeland, hostland, diaspora), to time (past, present, future), and to reality (real, imagined, remembered). As a result, though accented films do pack a great deal of drama, anxiety, and fear around the telephone as an epistolary instrument, these emotions usually result from or signal the locatedness, the dislocation, or the utter unlocatability of the diegetic figures, their homelands, or the concept of home.

(Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 135)

For John, the telephone has provided an important means by which to communicate with Lila, Suki, and Mike. For the first time in his life, he is connected to and actively participating in a Korean diasporic community.

The significance of these connections compels John to continue to trust Lila and to act on her misdirection. However, when certain key pieces of information seem to deviate from Lila's account of events, he begins to retrace his steps and realizes Lila's duplicity. By this point, more of the exchanges between the characters in the film have already become heavily reliant on such electronic epistolary telephonic media as cell phones, voicemail, and answering machines. As the record of John, Lila, and Suki's conversation and further telephonic exchanges increase in symbolic importance, communication grows increasingly disrupted and confused. "And yet, you're saying yes,

almost automatically, suddenly, sometimes irreversibly. Your picking it up means the call has come through. It means more: you're its beneficiary rising to meet its demand, to pay a debt" (Ronell 2). In essence, John's calls to Lila, Suki, and Mike create a situation of indebtedness, initially with positive implications resulting in the growth of a set of friendships, drawing John into the Koreatown community, to which he had been an outsider up until his involvement with Kevin's case.

The gifts, payments, or debts exchanged between John, Lila, Suki, and Mike involve not just the individual giver and the recipient, but these exchanges also involve the larger community to which they belong. As John's friendships deepen, the demands increase and have wider implications. As Marcel Mauss argues, "it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other" (5). The increased obligations required in these collective relationships also involve "the principle of rivalry and hostility that prevails in all these practices" (Mauss 6). John's limited cultural and linguistic understanding of this community and how to manage their economy of obligation, as well as his limited access to key information—all of which is otherwise shared more freely between Lila, Mike, and Suki—leave him ill-prepared for his escalating conflicts with Mike.

The destabilizations that the telephone enacts are perhaps most apparent toward the end of the film. In a moment of high drama, Danny, another of Mike's underlings, has been shot and urgently needs medical attention. He had been an accomplice to a successful robbery at Mama's, orchestrated by Mike. They had stolen a considerably amount of money, and had injured many and killed a few of the employees, including Kyuc. Danny had also been shot in the leg before fleeing the scene. Mike and another

friend, Saeng, take Danny to a cell phone store. Mike leaves to take care of other business, leaving Saeng to watch Danny and await further instructions. In the meantime, they have been instructed not to call the authorities. However, when Saeng steps out to go to a nearby deli, Danny takes advantage of his absence to try and seek help. He is growing anxious that he has been unable to stop the bleeding from his leg. Ironically, in the cell phone store, he is unable to find a working phone. After he frantically digs through a box of dead cell phones, opening them at random and listening for dial tones, the camera focuses on a land-line phone within his reach. This offers a comical note in the midst of Danny and Saeng's anxiety, and diffuses the tension that had been building throughout the film, with the other characters' frustrated attempts to directly connect with one another.

In her introduction to *The Telephone Book*, Ronell notes that “[The telephone] destabilizes the identity of self and other, subject and thing, it abolishes the originariness of site ... It is itself unsure of its identity as object, thing, piece of equipment, perlocutionary intensity or artwork ... it offers itself as instrument of the destinal alarm ...” (7). This emphasis on the perlocutionary—or briefly, the effect of the speech act on the hearer—is particularly useful to consider in *West 32nd*, as so much of the narrative depends on how and when a particular message is received by the hearer.

John had just left his neighborhood bar when he hears his cell phone ringing. He not only picks up right away, but he responds immediately, driving over to the cell phone store to connect with Danny in person. Danny tells John about the robbery and the shootings, and answers all of John's questions. As Danny freely discloses all of this information to John, hoping that will bring him closer to the medical care he urgently

needs, Saeng pleads with and threatens Danny. He talks to him in Korean, partially because the two usually do speak to one another in Korean, but also to keep John from understanding exactly what he is saying. Danny's honest and direct responses to John's questions present a strong contrast to Lila's duplicitous translation and her disregard for John's questions during his earlier interview with Suki.

After calling an ambulance for Danny, John stops by Mama's where he sees the surviving employees attending to the dead and injured. He leaves before he is spotted, and then rushes to Suki's apartment to find that she has been brutally murdered before returning home. By this point, Mike, Saeng and several others have broken into John's apartment and are waiting for him. Having eliminated the one eyewitness who would have connected him to Jin Ho's murder, Mike plans to kill John as well. Realizing Mike's intent, John tries to reason with him and to negotiate with him.

You can't get rid of me, man. I'm not some undocumented immigrant you can get rid of and nobody's going to miss, man. (Mike cocks the gun, pointing it directly at John.) The tape. The tape. I have the tape. I don't have Suki anymore but I have the tape. I have it at the office, it's filed. You kill me, guess who they're going to come looking for tomorrow. Mike, Mike, you're not fourteen anymore man. They arrest you, they arrest you, you're going to fry.

Despite John's inability to directly access the various layers of translation that had been captured on his recorded conversation with Suki and Lila, he knows enough to deduce the value of Suki's testimony on tape. The existence of her correspondence as a record

affords John leverage in this precarious situation. After a minimally violent altercation, Mike and his friends leave John's apartment.

Later in the film, Mike and John meet to negotiate the exchange of the tape. John suggests meeting at his own neighborhood bar, which is located in Manhattan, but outside of Koreatown. Here, John is noticeably more confident and, for the first time, Mike seems insecure and unsure how to act. When Mike falters when the server asks him for his drink order, John steps in to order a drink for him. His authoritative tone continues as he negotiates the terms by which he would hand over the tape of Suki's account of Jinho's murder. John agrees to part with the recording in exchange for Mike's producing a witness who can help settle Kevin's case and acquit him of all charges. John tells Mike, "Give me an eyewitness. I don't give a shit how. Just give me somebody that would testify that Kevin didn't do it."

The "witness" that Mike arranges for is Miyun, one of the hostesses at Mama's who, up until the end of the film, had not been a principle character. She describes the perpetrator in such a way that would clear both Mike and Kevin's connection with the crime. "Then a Chinese guy with an orange hat, he's about 12 or 13 years old. I don't know for sure, but he seemed like a child, pulled out a gun from his pants and suddenly shot Jinho. I panicked and didn't know what to do. I wanted to help Jinho, but how could I help?" She testifies in front of a video camera, another type of epistle; however, one that incorporates both visual and audio components. Further, she speaks entirely in Korean, which would later necessitate a translation for it to be submitted as evidence for the English-speaking authorities. The distancing of the testimony from the actual event through a recording device and translation is strongly reminiscent of Suki's original

testimony. However, in the case with Miyun, her outright deceit constructs another distancing factor. Her “eyewitness” account strays far from the accounts told by Suki and Mike, and their flashbacks indicate that she was nowhere near the scene of the crime. Further, the record of her facial expressions and gestures to support her testimony (and its authenticity) provide an additional layer of duplicity unavailable in John’s recording of Suki’s verbal account. As a result of this exchange, John clears Kevin from the crime and makes partner, fulfilling his initial hopes that his successful management of this case would advance his career. Mike similarly realizes his own professional aspirations. He is reinstated as manager of Mama’s, following Jinho’s murder and Kyuc’s even more recent death, during the burglary that Mike himself had organized. John and Mike’s exchange of Suki’s tape proves mutually beneficial for them, though the costs of this agreement seem to weigh heavily on their consciences.

In *West 32nd* and *In Between Days*, while telephones initially function to sustain and even deepen social relationships, the characters’ increased reliance on leaving voicemails signals the weakening of these ties. Hamid Naficy discusses the preoccupation with place in accented films, with particular attention to

their open and closed space-time (chronotopical) representations. That of the homeland tends to emphasize boundlessness and timelessness, and it is cathected by means of fetishization and nostalgic longing to the homeland’s natural landscape, mountains, monuments, and souvenirs. The representation of life in exile and diaspora, on the other hand, tends to stress claustrophobia and temporality, and it is cathected to sites of confinement and control and to narratives of panic and pursuit. While the

idyllic open structures of home emphasize continuity, these paranoid structures of exile underscore rupture. (*An Accented Cinema* 5)

In *In Between Days*, Aimie maintains a nostalgic idea of her homeland through her postcards to her father. The physical expanses of Korea's natural landscapes—and the physical distance between Aimie and her father—are invoked in the extreme long shots of each of the nine postcard scenes, often depicting the cityscape in the far distance against open skies at dusk. Quick cuts both before and after these postcard scenes establish a strong juxtaposition between these expansive exteriors and the cramped apartment she shares with her mother. Such open spaces are also contrasted against the small noraebang rooms, where heightened emotions (in both films) and the continued threat of physical violence (in *West 32nd Street*) make these confined spaces feel even more claustrophobic.

For John, in *West 32nd*, the diasporic community in New York's Koreatown supplants the homeland itself. He initially seems to mythologize Flushing and 32nd Street, seeing boundlessness and timelessness within these diasporic spaces, rather than in Korea itself. Thus, when his idealization of Koreatown is challenged later in his investigation, he experiences an acute sense of paranoia because for him, the site of the diasporic community and the site of his concept of the homeland occupy the same geographic space.

The ending of *West 32nd* closely mirrors its beginning, with one key difference being that Mike has now replaced Jinho. Mike looks at his reflection in a window overlooking 32nd Street. This is the same window through which Suki saw Jinho get shot. Just as Jinho did in the beginning of the film, Mike collects a bag filled with cash before

walking out of Mama's. While walking the short distance to his car, his cell phone rings, but no one responds when he picks up. All of this eerily mirrors the events immediately preceding Jinho's own death, none of which is lost on Mike. Earlier in the film, a flashback had shown Kevin waiting for Jinho in the back seat of his car, as Mike pulled up the block in the getaway car, in time to witness Jinho's final moments. Though shaken by this recent memory, Mike does get into his car but immediately adjusts the rearview mirror, as if to make sure that no one is waiting for him in his back seat. The film cuts just before he drives off. Jinho was shot just seconds after pulling out of his parking space. This leaves ambiguous as to whether Mike may meet a similar fate as Jinho, whether immediately or in the not-too-distant future.

When Mike starts up his car, the song that comes on is *내사랑 내곁에*, the same song that Mike had sung with Suki earlier in the film. Both Mike's earlier rendition and Kim Hyun Sik's original recording playing in the car are soulful, their voices artfully cracking at emotionally tense moments in the song. As the scene fades, the song continues as the end credits roll. In both scenes that feature this song, Mike seems to identify with the lyrics. At noraebang, he is singing to Suki, who he pursues as a romantic interest throughout the film. He does not realize that she had witnessed Jinho's death and, therefore, knows of his involvement in the murder. In the final scene, viewers familiar with Kim Hyun Sik would associate the ominous tone of the scene with Kim's own premature death at thirty-two years of age. This is a final example of the ways in which the calligraphic nature of noraebang bleeds and permeates into aspects of the films and even beyond the edges of the films themselves.

Epilogue

As co-writers of *West 32nd* Michael Kang and Edmund Lee have noted in past interviews, there is more that they would have liked to do with their film, but they ultimately needed to scale back due to budget and time constraints, and due to others' concerns about the film's reception. A prominent feature of the film that I keep returning to is its selective subtitling, which I find to be among the most fascinating and enjoyable aspects of the viewing experience. In the audio commentary of the film, Michael Kang discusses his experience seeing *West 32nd* with an alternate set of subtitles for a screening in South Korea.

When we were showing it in Korea, they subtitle it the opposite way, with no English subtitles. And my friend, who was living in Korea at the time, who's not Korean, came and saw it in the theaters and had the exact reaction that I feel is the best way to watch the movie. He's like, feeling really alienated. You know exactly what's going on. You get everything. But it, you know, it's much more of a visceral experience. Things aren't just spelled out for you.

In order to accommodate the Korean-speaking viewers, not only is the direction of translation reversed, but the portions of the film that are subtitled are also reversed. Thus, the American and Korean versions would have subtitles for different parts of the film, thus changing the moments in which calligraphic textuality emerges on the screen, and ultimately changing the visual composition of the film itself.

In an interesting way, in the particular screening in South Korea that Michael Kang discusses, his friend may be one of very few members of the audience who would

be able to identify with the specific kind of alienation that the protagonist, John, experiences. In his decision to live in Korea, however temporarily, he would have personally experienced the dramatic shift of going from being part of an English-speaking majority to being part of a language minority in South Korea. However, as Kang notes, “You know exactly what’s going on. You get everything.” As both he and his co-writer, Edmund Lee, can each identify with the film’s protagonist in their experience of initially feeling like outsiders to long-established Korean American communities, they are sensitive to the kinds of cultural alienation that such an experience would entail.

John Cho, the actor who plays the character of John Kim, notes how in bringing so much Korean language into the film and drawing on Korean and Korean American culture, *West 32nd* offers culturally specific depictions of the Koreatown community. In doing so, the film also closely attends to the conditions in which entering that kind of environment can feel uncomfortable and lonely for an outsider.

This is something that struck me when I first read the script was how much Korean there was in this script. And I thought it was very courageous. And even Asian American movies tend to kind of explain all the Korean stuff and, you know, italicize the words, and the whole script feels so italicized in general. And so, I was so impressed with that, and I thought the spirit of this movie is something that I wanted to be connected with.

The extent to which the film was unapologetically “italicized” as Cho describes it, or “accented” as Naficy would call it, had initially made Jane Kim hesitant to agree to be involved in the project.

Jane Kim, the actress who plays Suki, expressed deep reservations about committing to playing a relatively unassimilated Korean immigrant. In Michael Kang’s account of past conversations with her, it becomes evident that in her acting career, Jane Kim had been expected to play similar roles for other projects, something that many Asian American actors unfortunately, but almost inevitably, experience.

Jane grew up in Georgia, and she completely is believable as like a Korean immigrant. That’s always a hard thing for me, when I’m doing a movie and there’s a part with a character where, you know, Asian American actors have to go up for the, kind of, ching-chong roles all the time. And there was a long discussion I had with Jane because she didn’t really want to do it. ‘Cause she had to do that all the time. ... but it’s different because the perspective.

Kang continues to articulate the difference between playing a stereotype and playing a three-dimensional character who actually is an immigrant and who genuinely has trouble with the English language. Kang explains that we should not assume that “just because the woman, the person has an accent or the person is an immigrant, that it’s automatically a stereotype.”

Jane Kim’s concerns are understandable and are deeply rooted in the stereotype of Asian Americans as unassimilated, or even inassimilable, immigrants. As Kang mentions, however, the context in which Kim plays her character is significantly different from

most mainstream productions that call for this kind of character. As nearly the entirety of the cast of *West 32nd* is Korean or Korean American, the kinds of tensions between characters in the film are less racially motivated in the kind of white/non-white binary that is more familiarly represented in American media. The cultural misunderstandings explored in *West 32nd* are much more nuanced. The film depicts how Korean American culture is distinct from other Asian American cultures, reinforcing the heterogeneity of Asian Americans. At the same time, the film emphasizes the heterogeneity *within* Korean American communities.

This conversation between Jane Kim and Michael Kang speaks to the kinds of questions that are currently being examined within the field of Asian American studies today. When the earliest Asian American studies programs had been established in 1968, they were distinguished from Asian studies and area studies programs. This was, in part, as a response to the then- (and still-) persistent stereotype that Asian Americans were both foreign and inassimilable. However, while this unfortunately continues to be an issue, it has much more difficult to maintain this historic distinction between Asians and Asian Americans. Asians have continued to immigrate to the United States, technology has facilitated Asian diasporic communities to maintain their connections with family and friends internationally, and Asians and Asian Americans continue migrations and reverse migrations between Asia and North America, while also traveling and relocating to other parts of the world. While the reasoning behind sustaining a distinction between Asians and Asian Americans is understandable, it inadvertently excludes many different kinds of experiences that do not neatly fall into either category. Perhaps, for similar reasons, Asian languages had often been distanced temporally (associating Asian languages most closely

with first generation immigrants) or geographically (representing them as languages spoken overseas) in much of Asian American literature.

In the past decade, and especially in the past several years, there has been a reconsideration of these earlier concerns that had been careful to distinguish between Asian and Asian American studies. While each field is still unique, diasporic frames and interdisciplinary interests offer more ways in which to consider the nuances between the fields, as well as the histories, cultural productions, and lived experiences that explore the spaces carved out between them. The mistranslations and misunderstandings that may result from speaking across languages and the unintelligibility that may emerge from working across disciplines should not be seen as obstacles. Rather, these pauses offer moments to rethink, reflect, and continue to make new meanings.

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