

The Fantasy of Asian America:
Identity, Ideology, and Desire

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Abstract

The fantasy of Asian America: Identity, Ideology, and Desire

This dissertation reconsiders the extant critique of Asian American identity politics in Asian American literary studies. The intellectual “war of position” initiated over claiming the legitimacy of Asian America has been articulated in the combined terms of *both* race and gender. I argue that the way in which the war of position is articulated in the binaries between nationalist and feminist critiques and between race-bound identity politics and non-identity politics is a misguided framework for understanding the point at issue in Asian American literary studies. The intra-racial anxiety about the identity-based politics of Asian America originates not so much in the identitarian distinction between the real and the fake or between the good subject and the bad subject; rather, it is attributed to a discursive gap in the self-affirmation of “what Asian America is” within the larger framework of American nationalism. This gap results from the variable extent to which Asian Americans make their dynamic relationship—namely, both resisting and collaborating—with American nationalism in relation to which Asian America came into being both autonomously and subordinately.

Within the contextual framework, this dissertation explores the way in which the stereotypes of Asian Americans operate as fundamental to the constitution of both Asian America and white America. I make use of psychoanalysis as a methodological tool to analyze the dialectical dynamics between Asians in America and the gaze of white-centered American society where the exotic presence of the former evokes the desire and anxiety of the latter simultaneously. Within this framework, this dissertation collects some representative cultural products of Asian America as touchstones of Asian

American representation. I consider the collection an ideological matrix of the symbolic reality that constitutes the uneven relations of our lives in terms of race, gender, and sexuality and takes them for granted. Simultaneously, this collection shows how both white and Asian Americas negotiate with each other to attend to both intra-racial and inter-racial anxiety and trauma caused by their racial, cultural, sexual, geographical encounters at various levels of different historical and political contexts.

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Introduction

The fantasy of Asian America: Identity, Ideology, and Desire

The social movements of the late 1960s paved the way for the formation of a number of Asian American Studies and other ethnic studies programs on college campuses beginning in the 1980s. Not coincidentally, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 abolished the national-origin quotas, bringing about an influx of immigrants from Asia to the United States, and contributing to the rapid expansion of Asian American communities across the country. The institutionalization of Asian American Studies into higher education suggests that this field has a legitimate responsibility to represent a not only increasing but also diversifying population of Asian Americans. Asian American Studies' educational initiative has been so politically successful as to raise the awareness of Asians in the U.S. as "insiders" and to improve distorted and marginalized perceptions in the mainstream culture. Asian American Studies, from its inception, defined itself as oppositional to an existing social order that justified unequal relations of people in terms of race, which perpetuated the hegemony of the white race (Hune 1-4).

It is not surprising, then, that in the wake of the long history of repression, exclusion, and marginalization, the historic publication of the first Asian American anthology *Aiiieeee!* described itself as "fifty years of [Asian Americans'] whole voice" (xii).

The publication of *Aiiieeeee!* in 1974, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, opened a new era of Asian American literary studies, serving as a platform to canonize works of Asian Americans. *Aiiieeeee!* articulated anger against white America; the title refers to a dying cry turned into resistance to both stereotyped and whitewashed images of Asian America in order to reinstate its “real” identity in opposition to what the editors call “the fake.” It aimed at redrawing the ethnic contours of “Asian America,” establishing what for some became the measure of racial integrity and authenticity. This literary incarnation of Asian American cultural nationalism was designed to pose Asian America against a mainstream ideology that left Asian Americans “in a state of self-contempt, self-rejection, and disintegration” (*Aiiieeeee!* xii). The anthology defined an anti-Orientalist agenda, celebrated the working-class, and rehabilitated Asian masculinity. But it also gave birth to, as Shawn Wong mentions, “a dialogue [to] piss everybody off” in the field of Asian American studies (Partridge 95).

At present, the literary legacy of *Aiiieeeee!* is mixed and inconsistent. On the one hand, its publication initiated an oppositional literary movement that contradicted a liberal discourse of multiculturalism which the editors described as “white racist love”; it targeted the liberal ideology of what they called the “American dishonesty” of tolerance and assimilation. The editors claimed that the post-war liberal America had constantly humiliated Asians—especially Chinese and Japanese—by treating them as a subhuman object of both love and hatred, that is, to be either kept in kennels as pets or locked up in pounds as mad dogs (xx).

On the other hand, however, this shout of resistance and triumph against white supremacy also accompanied a narrow definition of Asian American literature. Such narrowness is not only a product of limited pan-ethnicity, though the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* mainly featured Japanese American, Chinese American, and Filipino American writers. In a larger sense, their anti-assimilationist project further established a bounded and exclusionary Asian America which had trouble accommodating diversity not just ethnically, but in terms of gender, sexuality, regionality, and other forms of difference. Asian American feminist scholar Elaine H. Kim acknowledged this in her preface to *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, an Asian American anthology published in 1993 as a revisionary gesture towards the contentious remarks of the editors of *Aiiieeeee!*. She states that, despite its political necessity, this vision of Asian America rendered Asian American identity fixed, closed, and narrowly defined: it divides Asian Americans from Asians, privileges race over gender and class, accepts compulsory heterosexuality as natural, and constructs a hierarchy of authenticity to separate the real from the fake (*CCID* ix).

The cultural nationalist inspiration of *Aiiieeeee!* envisioned Asian America as an imagined “real” that legitimizes Asian Americans’ uniqueness in the mainstream. But such an ambitious trial resulted in incomplete success with a side effect: the editors infelicitously developed a sexist discourse concerning how Asian American women betray their ethnic fidelity to Asian America by marrying outside of their race, which they posit hurts Asian Americans’ self-esteem (*Aiiieeeee!* xiii).

The editors of *Aiiieeeee!* published a second anthology, *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, in 1991 which consistently voiced anger and resistance. This more extensive and much

thicker collection also intensified this sexist discourse with an attack on popular Asian American women writers and their work, including Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). The editors harshly criticized these writers for writing "fake" Orientalist works and distorting "real" Asian American history and experience to feed the racist imagination of white Americans. They insisted that many Asian American women writers prostituted themselves to the cultural imperialism of liberal America by portraying Chinese and Chinese American men as either effeminate, like Charlie Chan, or homosexual menaces, like Dr. Fu Manchu (*TBA* xiii). The editors of the *Aiiieeeee!* series considered that the popularity of Asian American women writers' works in the mainstream comes from the way in which they satisfy the fantasy of white liberal American faith which lies in the deep-seated system of Western Orientalism. Namely, the *Aiiieeeee!* editors' sexist and homophobic agenda against Asian American women writers became an essential strategy for thinning out stereotyped images of Asian Americans and building up an ethnic front line beating off Western Orientalism.

While both *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* contributed to the groundbreaking movement¹ of establishing Asian American literary studies, their provocative criticism of Asian American women writers divided literary critics, with some such as Rachel Lee arguing that the nationalist discourse of Asian America recuperated Asian

¹ Before the publication of *Aiiieeeee!* in 1974, there were no Asian American works taught in his English classes as Shawn Wong, one of its coeditors, states in an interview. As to the title of the anthology, it is parodying the dying cry of many Asian actors on Hollywood's movies (Partridge 91).

American manhood by relying on “gendered tropes” of women as dependent, ill-informed subjects (4), the stereotype of women as inferior to men.

The larger question is how these anthologies, in a conservative gesture of establishing the exclusionary identity of Asian America using the binary of “the real and the fake,” tended to ignore the wide spectrum of Asian American subjects that came into being in the transpacific relation between Asia and America, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. This vision of “Asian America” could not represent and reflect on the diverse and heterogeneous instances of historical, cultural, and political contexts which have informed Asians’ diasporic experience of *becoming* American via migration, labor exchange, and citizenship since the Cold War and the prevalence of global capitalism which followed. In this regard, Rachel Lee contends that in the biased framework of cultural nationalism, Asian American Studies cannot but be “located within the context of American Studies and stripped of its international links” (5).

The reception of *Aiiiiiii!* posed a perplexing question for many people in the Asian American community regarding what would be a legitimate face of Asian America, and it never fails to be a reiterative site of contention among Asian American scholars. What is framed as a debate about gender now has proliferated, exposing how the literary representation of Asian Americans is politicized in multiple ways. *Aiiiiiii!* illustrates, in a sense, the intellectual “war of position,” as borrowed from Antonio Gramsci², among Asian Americans, especially in relation to how the imagined identity

² In his 1971 *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci makes a strategic distinction between a “war of position” and a “war of maneuver.” The former refers to is a culture war of intellectuals in which the anti-capitalist engages a continuous struggle across different fronts at

of Asian America interpolates each different Asian American subjects in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Its publication facilitated not just contentious, but productive, conversations with regard to Asian American representation and identity. In other words, it initiated a chronic debate regarding the legitimate face of Asian America for future generations to possibly consult, contest, and reform.

In the following section, I investigate how this war of position, initiated by the publication of *Aiiiiieee!* in the 1970s, has continued thus far. The course of the war shows different and inconsistent understandings of Asian American literary studies, reflecting on how this illustrates the difficulty of claiming a singular identity for Asian America. This introduction chapter further shows how the debate on the legitimacy of Asian America has developed to the extent that Asian American identity has turned into a theoretical mode of analysis or an abstract form of critique. Throughout this dissertation, thus, I will diagnose and analyze a wide spectrum of both harmonious and conflicting subject positions at various levels of lived experiences of Asian Americans. I further explore the way in which Asian American identity is acknowledged due to nationalist inspiration that has grown against anti-Asian racism in the U.S., but which is denied as un-decidable, strategic, and subjectless. Despite such an intellectual war of position in Asian American literary studies, however, I contend that the discursive

various levels to have the dominant voice in the public space and culture over the enemy, the capitalist. It includes enhancing class consciousness, educating revolutionary theory and analysis, and inspiring revolution. In comparison, a war of maneuver indicates is what happens after the war of position, as Jinqi Ling explains, “where everything is condensed into one front in one ‘strategic’ moment of struggle for the purpose of opening a single victorious ‘breach’ in the ‘enemy’s defenses’” (12). In brief, this war of maneuver can be translated as an armed insurrection against capitalism.

consistency and historical continuity between the two parties engaged in this decades-long war has undeniably been kept within the nationalist framework of Asian America.

Obviously, this war, on the one hand, refers to a positional struggle between both androcentric nationalists and pluralist feminists for the legitimacy of their own assumptions of Asian America, and seemingly reaches a stalemate in both theory and praxis. More importantly, on the other, it ensures that the conflictual positions have their dialectical—i.e., interdependent, complementary, and perpetual—dynamic at play, through which the knowledge production of Asian American literary studies expands its intellectual horizon of both theory and praxis by not only resisting but also collaborating with the racialized and nationalized network of American racism. Against this backdrop, I diagnose and analyze the existing literature of Asian American literary studies which bears witness to a range of contradictory and conflicting voices in. Then, I further explore how the social construct of Asian America has taken a firm hold in the U.S. in supplemental and intersected terms of race, gender, and sexuality.

In effect, these terms exist as not only ambiguously overdetermined but decisively differentiated in meaning, such that the multiple definitions of Asian America in these terms end up often antagonistic, conflicting, and exclusive to one another: that is, the war of position. Instead, I see them rather supplementary to, interdependent with, and collaborative with one another in rethinking the nation of Asian America in these terms. In this perspective, those terms operate as an intellectual point of reference which helps keep revising the existing meanings of Asian America where we observe heterogeneous subject positions coming into view but at the same time, maintaining the larger politico-cultural framework that has produced them at

variable contexts. In this introduction, the invariable framework bears on Asian American—not necessarily cultural—nationalism that came into being within the racist nationalism of the U.S. With that said, I continue to investigate the prospects for the contradictory politics of Asian America at play and how it helps critically analyze the nationalist framework of identity politics in which the ethnic contours of Asian America have always been unstable but nevertheless, remained in a rather determined manner.

“Subjectless” Paradigm Shift

Undeniably, the publication of *Aiiieeee!* served as the foundation of education for future generations of Asian Americans in the 1970s and after. It is true that its definition of Asian Americans is contingent and arbitrary, yet the first Asian American literary movement in the wake of the publication was, as Jessica Hagedorn puts it, “an absolute breakthrough for Asian Americans”: “The energy and interest sparked by *Aiiieeee!*...was essential to Asian American writers because it gave us visibility and credibility as creators of our own specific literature” (*CCID* xxvii). In this sense, *Aiiieeee!* is what initially engaged in a discussion on identity politics in Asian American literary studies in earnest. As a result, it faced critical challenges in conversation with critics such as Lisa Lowe and Kandice Chuh, who advance an idea that cultural nationalists’ identity politics constrain our understandings of diverse subjects and agency by homogenizing the lived experiences of Asian Americans.

The *Aiiieeee!* editors’ problematic distinction of the real and the fake in Asian American representation was arguably attributed to the political necessity of ethnic solidarity for Asian America. Although it has been decades old since its first use, the

concept of cultural nationalism is still influential in the contemporary scholarship of Asian American studies one way or another. The author of *Narrating Nationalisms* in 1998, Jinqi Ling, is one of those who side with the *Aiiieeee!* editors, arguing for an ethnic uniqueness of Asian America as differentiated from other parts of American culture and identity. In defense of the developmental narrative of bildungsroman in Asian American literature, Ling prioritizes the nationalist solidarity of Asian America over the liberal trope of cultural hybridity. Ling defines the latter as the “postmodern concept of the nomadic” (7) which has been popular in Asian American literary studies from the 1990s by examining realist narrative as structured by the teleological developmentalism of Western modernity. He regards as devoid of historical materialism the postmodernist call for a paradigm shift for Asian American studies into the postmodernist tropes of difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity.

In particular, Ling makes a critical response to the pioneering work of Lisa Lowe’s 1996 *Immigrant Acts* in regard of her intervention into pluralist conceptions of American culture and politics. Lowe critically expresses concerns with the essentialist trajectories of Asian American identity, urging instead to adopt the postmodern notion of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity and thus to reconsider Asian America as a socially constructed unity. She suggests that the rubric “Asian American” needs to be understood as necessitated for political alliance in the face of state-sponsored racial formation and exclusion. Ling’s objection to Lowe lies in a practical dilemma that such provisional alliance cannot secure for minoritized subjects so hegemonic a resistance that it subverts the extant power relations of race in which, as Lowe points out, Asian Americans are denied a full legitimacy of American citizenship. He observes, “Under

such circumstances, difference can only derive from and lead to difference, and Asian Americans' heterogeneous 'origins' are necessarily the same as 'the fundamental condition' of their equal access to such differences in a material sense" (8). Despite its effectiveness of making Asian American identity rather visible and coherent, the developmental narrative is denounced for assimilating the ethnic to the norm of the dominant Western culture. In oppositional response to this, Ling sympathizes with the necessity of realist narrative to deal with the mainstream culture denying Asian Americans both their national and cultural membership in full. As a result, he rather focuses on ambiguities and contradictions in literary texts that necessarily result from the inextricable—that is, not only collaborating but also contradicting—relationships between the demands of Asian American identity politics and the dominant ideology of multicultural pluralism.

On the one hand, Jinqi Ling's critical allegiance to the *Aiiieeee!* editors in light of anti-racist defiance is, in a broader perspective, aligned with the counterculture movement of the black protest; on the other hand, his oppositional position as such becomes an easy target for feminist critics such as Laura H. Y. Kang. In her 2002 *Compositional Subjects*, Kang claims that Ling's defense of the nationalist formation of Asian America appears to attack feminism as a betrayal of ethnic communality based on a unified antiracist project. She continues that in such a nationalist discourse, as motivated by an antiracist resistance to assimilationist pressures, Asian American women are always "forced to choose between familial and sexual alliances or between gender collectivity and Asian cultural identity" (57). It is in fact intriguing to see the debate on the legitimacy of Asian American identity pass into a war of position in

gendered terms. Why is it that the gender struggle in Asian American literary studies becomes so obvious when it comes to the debate over the legitimacy of Asian America while continuously remaining unresolved? Kang finds an answer to the question in the lost male authority of Asian American men under the rule of white racist America, and considers it the ideological core of the imagined nation of Asian America, which is something deployed to solidify the nationalist construction of Asian American subjectivity: “Deprived of the rewards of patriarchal legitimacy, some Asian American men have responded by attempting to reassert male authority over the cultural domain and over women by subordinating feminism to nationalist concerns” (55).

Certainly, there is a great amount of anxiety embedded in the dialectical war of position between both nationalist and feminist critics in response to the identitarian construction of Asian America. On the one hand, the anti-assimilationism of the former argues for a political necessity of maintaining the identity-based politics of Asian America despite its obvious shortcomings. On the other hand, the strategic essentialism of the latter supports the postmodernist idea of hybridity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity to free Asian American subjects from the monolithic framework of identity-based Asian America, which they contend furthers uneven relations and stratifications intra-racially. On the whole, the pluralistic point of view of the latter has increasingly gained predominance over the other; moreover, as mentioned earlier, this war of position in Asian American studies is articulated tendentiously in a gendered binary of masculine nationalism vs. feminist pluralism. It is positively indisputable that notions such as identity politics and cultural nationalism are regarded as obsolete and even inappropriate to the contemporary trend of ethnic studies scholarship which is

ideologically slanted to the leftist political view in contemporary academia. In effect, cultural nationalist ideas rather simplistically tend to situate heterogeneous members of Asian America in the arbitrary and contingent framework of real and fake, authentic and assimilated, good and bad, etc. As Viet T. Nguyen points out in his 2002 *Race and Resistance*, the outmoded binary that began at the birth of the idea of Asian America in the 1960s as to how to define Asian Americans as either “model minorities” or “bad subjects” still haunts the contemporary scholarship of Asian American studies.

Nonetheless, it is still worth questioning why such binary oppositions in the Asian American war of position continuously end up in gendered tropes of women. The feminist view that the lost male authority of Asian American men is a primary cause for rendering masculine the nationalist construction of Asian America is not a satisfactory answer to the question; it more often than not compromises and acknowledges the gendered position of Asian American women writers as prostituting Asian America to the liberal society of the U.S. It makes seemingly unavoidable the theorization of the Asian American war of position in gendered terms as long as the imagined nation of Asian America is conceived in such a subjective and arbitrary distinction of what is real and fake. The reasoning for it is obviously that the gendered tropes of Asian American identity result from the overdetermined combination of both sexism and nationalism, viciously identifying assimilationist discourse as feminine, inferior, and traitorous. And more important, the nationalist discourse of Asian America reflects on the extent to which the liberal discourse of American citizenship works as a quasi-colonial discourse: that is, the presence of Asian America bears reference to the democratic values of the U.S. as the liberator of poverty-stricken Asians groaning under communist dictatorship.

Evidently, Asian American women scholars have attempted to unravel the dilemma via a paradigm shift of rethinking Asian American identity as an abstract mode of theoretical analysis. Among the leading scholars is Kandice Chuh, author of *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* published in 2003. In her book, Chuh advocates the necessity for deconstructing the identity-based category of Asian America in terms of what she calls a “subjectless analysis.” As an idea to dispel a uniform subjectivity, this notion challenges Asian American representation as stable, monolithic, and essentialist. Her call for the new paradigm to reconsider Asian America aims at breaking from the existing identity-based configuration of the ethnic nation; it is focused on “advancing and engaging in practices of liberation and freedom” (115) to promote the critical investigation of naturalized categories. She writes, “[W]hat is needed is not identity but a commitment to combating states of domination, to unifying for the sake not of the self but in the endless pursuit of justice” (148). Chuh’s ambitious articulation of “subjectlessness” becomes an effective tool for dismantling the extant politics of Asian American identity, achieving its persuasive power to move Asian American critique beyond the framework of the nation.

Theoretically, Chuh’s notion of “subjectless discourse” is considered an effective way that helps reconfigure Asian America in a more flexible³ way and thus

³ It has been argued that Asian Americans’ identification as American is subject to the transformative process of emasculation or castration to turn into a more recognizable and manageable racial other at best. Aihwa Ong calls it a process of “de-ethnicization,” which is essential to the historical and cultural embodiment of Asian Americans as a member of the U.S. As constituted in neoliberal capitalism that promotes the transnational diaspora of Asian Americans, the transformative identity refers to what Ong calls “flexible citizenship” that such transnational capitalist subjects come to have. It is a product of neoliberal transnationalism, which is produced in the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, globalization, and displacement that induce individuals to flexibly adapt to changing politico-economic conditions

make its members break from the established category of race and thus dispel the cultural nationalism of identity politics. Besides, the notion of “subjectless” subjectivity enables Asian Americans to set their political position against white racist America to combat social injustice in the rather humanitarian sense that they are defined in terms of not racial but un-decidable identity in pursuit of endless social justice. In this framework, Asian American studies turns into the forms of critique (Chuh 61) that help its members develop into an un-decidable subject that refuses to get confined within the ethnic framework of identity-based Asian America. In other words, Chuh’s theoretical concept of “subjectless-ness” can operate as unraveling the limits of an identity-based politics of resistance while doing justice to subaltern subjects, in light of the recognition of difference, which includes victims of intra-racial racism within Asian America. Given them all, I agree with Nhi Lieu on Chuh: “Contending that Asian Americanist discourse must move beyond celebratory representations, Chuh convincingly argues that the field must confront and grapple with the contradictory politics at play in complex depictions of race” (495). Chuh’s idea of “subjectless analysis” is convincing to an extent that that Asian American subjects cannot be categorized in a uniform way for their heterogeneous historiographies, variant political interests, and uneven relations with one another. In reality, the oppositional political embodiment of Asian America is in nature so multifarious, contradictory, and even antagonistic as to cause even intra-ethnic conflicts as witnessed in the case of the controversy over Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s

(FC 8). Suggesting that Asian American identity is “always in process” (FC 9), Ong’s notion of transnational subjectivity is both bio-political and geopolitically engaged in neoliberalism. Viet In *Race and Resistance*, Nguyen explains that the flexible citizenship of Asian Americans engages with the mobility of capitalism, enables economic survival, and helps maximize the individual’s opportunities in a world of mobile capital and corporations (22).

novel *Blu's Hanging* at the 1998 Association for Asian American Studies Conference in Hawai'i.⁴

This dissertation reconsiders how rethinking Asian Americans as subjectless might be realized not only theoretically but also practically. At stake is how we would possibly conceptualize the way in which Asian Americans remain so subjectless literally as to become non-Asian Americans within the national framework of becoming American. Chuh's argument for conceiving of Asian American studies as subjectless discourse drives from her rejection of the current uniform formation of Asian America, which results from her insistent rejection of any forms of nationalism (127). Yet it should be also noted that this makes its ethnic members *un-decidable* subjects without sets of stable differences to identify them in repudiation of ethnic essentialism. My point is to what extent we could *imagine* political, if neither national nor racial, incentives to motivate the un-decidable subjects to collectively combine together, via not so much identity as un-decidability (83), against the already nationalized and racialized establishment of American nationalism. Chuh's investment of subjectless discourse, in shifting Asian American studies away from the identity-based nation of Asian America, consequently, ends up in self-contradiction. More specifically, it comes to a stalemate that both the demand for social justice of equating *subjectless* difference with equality and its impossibility considering that the U.S. body politic takes on and exploits racial difference contradict each other. It is not to mention that in such a colonial context, Asian America is subject to having limited access to full citizenship by remaining racialized, marginalized, and ghettoized from the mainstream.

⁴ With regard to the controversy, see Chapter 4 in my dissertation.

Even while disputing the monolithic framework of Asian America in terms of ethnic essentialism, I object to the radical abstraction of Asian America as a mode of critique detached from identity-based Asian America. I consider that Chuh's anti-nationalist discourse cannot fully replace current identity politics that has been found to be, as she also puts it, "a powerful framework for mounting anticolonial struggles in the Third World to achieve formal political liberation" (127). If she persists in arguing for the subjectless discourse of anti-nationalism in rethinking Asian America as undecidable, it happens to downplay anti-colonial struggles taking place in different parts of the world, including the U.S. territory. As Candace Fujikane points out, Chuh's subjectless analysis can cause Asian Americans to not only partake in the colonial practice of the U.S. justifying her quasi-colonial occupation of Hawai'i and Iraq, but also the colonized peoples' aspiration for self-determination as a desire to regain their national territories ("FNN" 92). In the same logic, despite its known shortcomings, the cultural nationalism of Asian America still has its validity as an anti-colonial practice for resisting the quasi-colonial measures of U.S. nationalism: that is, the U.S. excludes Asian Americans as the permanent alien (colonial subject) and simultaneously, keeps them within her national boundaries by patronizingly flattering them as the model minority. In fact, I have discussed Fujikane's criticism on Chuh's subjectless discourse in Chapter 3 in more detail.

With their scholarships contextualized in different locations, such as Hawai'i and the mainland respectively, Fujikane and Chuh cannot but reveal their incompatible difference of position applied to the views of their common issue related to the oppositional politics of Asian America. In fact, there has been a growing concern about

the institutionalization of Asian American studies for its being cut off from the community despite its achieving greater autonomy and legitimacy in academia (Chiang 29). In reality, when occupying privileged positions in education and class, it is not easy for Asian American scholars to sustain their political position in opposition to the states of domination that have nourished their rather privileged status, which belies the public assumptions on their given ethnic identity. It creates a truly subjectless yet self-contradictory subjectivity that at its convenience, gives rise to a kind of guerilla subject becoming politically salient in the form of either inconspicuous resistance or submission.

With that said, I sympathize with Viet T. Nguyen to some degree. In *Race and Resistance*, he criticizes Asian American scholars for being hypocritical. He contends that while their scholastic status has recourse to radical politics to pose themselves “at the forefront of political consciousness in Asian American studies,” they are also invested in the visibility and value of Asian American literature as the proof of their own professional usefulness” to maintain their career. Particularly, Nguyen focuses on the positional difference between Asian American scholars who tend to posture themselves as oppositional and Asian American writers who he argues exhibit in their works a greater spectrum of ambivalence and flexibility in their representation of Asian America. He finds this difference ascribed to “the contradiction between the radical intellectual goals of Asian American studies and its institutional location” (14).

While erasing the identity-based category of race, consequently, Chu’s theoretical concept of subjectlessness can uphold a utilitarian and unbounded formation of Asian America. Within this framework, the question of Asian American

representation turns into an abstract object of analysis that renders them “subjectless-ly” performative due to the epistemological gap between the Asian American as a political being and the Asian American as an object of critical analysis. If their agency as political activist identity passes into an abstract object of study as detached from the lived experience of the Asian American community, Asian America can easily be co-opted by the neoliberal trope of U.S. multiculturalism. That is, we are all so different that we should remain *tolerant* toward others insofar as ethnic identity is nothing but cultural, abstract, and performative.⁵ This refers to the way in which we, subjectless performers with either un-decidable or provisional identities are, unknowingly or not, dictated by the U.S. ideology of multicultural nationalism that contingently and arbitrarily interpolates us in terms of race, gender, class, and sexuality. It seems that we are stuck in an endlessly reiterative process of identity formation and disappearance. As an abstract form of positional identity that only exists strategically, the subjectless Asian America cannot but be recognized as a racialized, sexualized, gendered, and working-class subject within the larger stereotypical binary of contradictory Asian Americans—that is, the minoritized yet model subject and the permanent yet captivating alien.

Such a paradigm shift, which turns Asian American critique into a deconstructive mode of non-identity politics, creates an ontological gap between their *being* and *becoming* of Asian American. In the following section, I show the way in which the contemporary assumption of Asian American identity as un-decidable, strategic, and subjectless becomes possible only via its ontological continuity with and

⁵ I will discuss in more detail the paradoxical formation of Asian America within the broader context of U.S. neoliberal multiculturalism in my conclusion chapter.

bearing reference to the most stereotypical figuration of Asian America, such as Charlie Chan. You will see how non-identitarian Asian America has its logical roots in anxiety about its pluralist subjectivity, which exists only with respect to the anti-Asian avatar of Charlie Chan, in light of what Jacques Derrida calls “hauntology.” In fact, the anxiety, which comes out in the paradoxical process of self-denial and self-indulgence sheds light on the current war of position in Asian American literary studies. I consider that the anxiety is concerned with a schizophrenic aspect of Asian America which reveals an ontological gap between their being and becoming of themselves: the pluralist subject of Asian America cannot fully break from the identity-based framework of Asian America since the idea of ethnic essentialism constitutes the very kernel of its contemporary formation as un-decidable, subjectless, and strategic. From now on, we will see how Charlie Chan works as the vehicle that provides the discursive and historical continuity of Asian America in which modern Asian American subjects are continuously identified (*being*) and dis-identified (*becoming*) simultaneously with him, the imagined core of the identity-based nation of Asian America.

Charlie Chan Is Alive!

One of the most representative Asian American women writers, Jessica Hagedorn, edited and published *Charlie Chan Is Dead* in 1993 as a revisionary gesture responding to the 1974 and 1991 publications of both *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!* respectively. She published its sequel *Charlie Chan Is Dead 2: At Home in the World* in 2004. Her decades-long project, however, is not exactly congruent with the current revisionist movement of Asian American feminist scholars opposing the racial politics

of Asian American identity. Hagedorn begins an introduction to her first anthology by saying, “Charlie Chan is our most famous fake ‘Asian’ pop icon” (*CCID* xxi). In fact, this stereotypical caricature of Asian Americans in U.S. pop culture functions as a juncture between the seemingly dialectical movements of both *Aiiieeeee!* and *Charlie Chan Is Dead* series. As mentioned earlier, the term “Aiiieeeee!” is parodying the dying cry of Asian actors on Hollywood movies, implicitly suggesting that Charlie Chan would never die unless the cry does stop.

In comparison, Hagedorn explains that her first collection is a response to the perceived Asian American character Charlie Chan who American pop culture renders completely non-threatening, non-complaining, and tolerant of humiliation (xxii-xxiii). She continues, “We are almost inhuman in our patience. We never get angry” (xxiii) just like the way Charlie Chan shows up in books and films. This is truly her doing homage to Frank Chin⁶ and his co-editors’ monumental achievement of making everybody pissed off both literally and figuratively, a revolutionary project to *kill* Charlie Chan fabricated by the white American novelist Earl Derr Biggers. Namely, meek Asian Americans’ ‘being pissed off’ signifies a symbolic opposition to white racist culture that gave birth to Charlie Chan, which resulted in not only containing but also unifying the intra-racial difference of Asian America. In this sense, Hagedorn’s *Charlie Chan Is Dead* series is not a radical repulsion for the nationalist movement which the *Aiiieeeee!* series initiated; rather, they can be considered a succession of Asian American writers’ counterculture to put an end to the Charlie Chan

⁶ Shawn Wong, one of the editors of both *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, calls Frank Chin the “godfather of Asian American literature” in that the rhetorical inspiration of both anthologies came from him. For more about Chin’s contribution to the publications of the anthologies, see Jeffrey F. L. Partridge’s interview with Wong on p. 96.

stereotype and, as Tasha G. Oren puts it, “[articulate] cultural anger and exclusion as their animating force” (339).

It is indisputable though that Hagedorn’s collections are breaking from the *Aiiiiiiii!* series thematically insofar as the latter has been denounced for the narrow definition of Asian America and the defense of its androcentric nationalist construction in the name of ethnic authenticity. Elaine H. Kim clearly expresses it in her preface to *Charlie Chan Is Dead 2*: “These writers are ‘at home in the world’ in the sense that they are not involved in an ‘identity’ movement in search of cultural roots. At the same time, they are never quite ‘at home in the world’” (xix). Diversifying and *dis-identifying* Asian American writerly subjects beyond their race-bounded identity politics, Hagedorn also articulates a voice similar to Kim’s in her introduction to *Charlie Chan Is Dead*: “Asian American literature? Too confining a term, maybe. World literature? Absolutely” (xxx). Both Kim and Hagedorn’s envisagement of new Asian American subjects as both diasporic and cosmopolitan consists in an endeavor to overcome the identity-based paradigm as the foundational basis for Asian American studies.

At stake is, however, whether this endeavor succeeds in having their primary objective accomplished, that is, to *kill* Charlie Chan in U.S. culture. Obviously, the answer is negative as Hagedorn states: “Ingrained in American popular culture, Charlie Chan is as much a part of the legacy of cultural stereotypes that continues to haunt, frustrate, and...sometimes inspire us.... Is Charlie Chan really dead? Probably not.... Charlie’s merely in a coma” (*CCID2* xxvii). In a sense, the symbolic figure of Charlie Chan served as a principal conduit that provides a discursive and historical continuity between the *Aiiiiiiii!* series and the *Charlie Chan Is Dead* series in Asian American

literary studies. As a well-known fact, the *Aiiieeeee!* series was published in a bid to create politico-cultural resistance to the racist U.S. culture which ridicules the general public of Asian Americans by fabricating the fictional character. Infamous fictional Asian Americans such as Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu, which America created, contributed to the production of distorted images of Asian Americans. More important, these stereotypes served as vehicles for an imagined construction of Asian America as tainted by the anti-Asian discourse that renders Asian Americans racially inferior, sexually perverse, and nationally threatening: that is, the Yellow Peril. In other words, Charlie Chan and the like began unwittingly bringing forth a collective form of Asian America in racial, sexual, and national terms.

The *Aiiieeeee!* series could come out against such a historical and contextual backdrop that the nation of Asian America had been constructed in the language of racism, sexism, and Orientalism. In a symbolic sense, Charlie Chan was the medium through which Asian America was conceptualized in its primordial form. Despite their antagonistic relationship, it is why both the *Aiiieeeee!* and *Charlie Chan Is Dead* series are historically and discursively connected, both having a common concern over the problematic construction of an Asian American nation in the U.S. To put it differently, Charlie Chan is not only a “fake” Asian America that should perish for the sake of a positive redefinition of Asian America, but also a symbolic cause of the infelicitous birth of Asian America as a whole within the monolithic framework of race-based nationalism. The politico-cultural orientation of the *Charlie Chan Is Dead* series is similar to that of its former series, yet it is also different from the latter to the extent that

it rebuked the uniform formation of Asian America that disregards the recognition of difference within it, which has been seen as reiterating the racist nationalism of the U.S.

Nonetheless, as its title “Charlie Chan Is Dead” self-evidently reveals, Hagedorn’s serial publication of this Asian American anthology could not fully get away from the apparitional power of Charlie Chan. The pluralist construction of Asian America, which the new series advocates to break from the identity-bounded framework of cultural nationalism, has concentrated on the redefinition of Asian American subjectivity as transnational, diasporic, and cosmopolitan, and this mission aimed at not only deconstructing androcentric nationalist agenda but also making Charlie Chan disappear. Given this, at issue is how we understand the relationship of the cosmopolitan subjects “at home in the world” with Charlie Chan, which was also a primary target of deconstruction in the identity-based nation of Asian America? Must it be worth questioning why the contributors to Hagedorn’s serial anthologies titled *Charlie Chan Is Dead* are concerned with issues about Charlie Chan? As their title implicitly suggests, Charlie Chan has been not dead but persistently haunting contemporary Asian American scholars and writers who they argue deny a race-specific identity and whose *un-decidable* and *subjectless* subjectivity lies at home in the world but no longer in Asian America. That is to say, why are those anti-patriarchal scholars and writers still obsessed with looking back at Chan and waiting for him to be dead since he is none other than a *fictional* Chinese American who can be neither a representative Asian nor a woman?

The fatality of Charlie Chan is coordinated with the abandonment of Asian American identity politics to such an extent that their anxiety for denying and de-

essentializing the unfathomable kernel of Asian American identity continues to persist. It is an anxiety that makes them continuously haunted by him, and this is why those writers, who contributed to the serial publications of the world literature beyond Asian America, have gathered for a decade under the title “Charlie Chan Is Dead.”

The title of Hagedorn’s serial anthologies implies a symptomatic paradox exposing an anxiety not only about Charlie Chan’s “hauntology” in Derrida’s terms,⁷ a notion that indicates the historical and discursive continuity of their presence with their past. In the sense that Asian American pluralists’ assumptions of Asian America exist only with respect to the nationalist counterpart of the past, the ontological paradox—that is, both *being* and *non-being* Asian American—creates contemporary Asian Americans to be over-determined, rather than un-decidable. That is to say, Charlie Chan remains, in terms of hauntology, the core of twenty-first century Asia America that modern Asian American subjects perceive as more ethically legitimate and politically correct than ever before.

In fact, their oppositional position “at home in the world” combating social injustice and racial discrimination is still constituted in the same reality as Chan was created, a caricature of none other than their own image in U.S. pop culture. The resulting anxiety in Asian American anti-nationalist scholars is articulated clearly as well as contradictorily in Elaine Kim’s preface to *Charlie Chan Is Dead*. She first confesses her past mistake about defining Asian American literature as work in English

⁷ “Hauntology” is a philosophical idea of Jacques Derrida introduced in his 1994 *Specters of Marx*. The combination of “haunt” and “ology” generally refers to the paradoxical state of the spectre as neither being nor non-being. It means that the present exists only with respect to the past, which always comes into being as part of the former in terms of ideas and values—that is, the ghost of the past within the present.

by writers of specific national origins, such as China and Japan, and their descendants about their American experiences (viii). She admits that this definition was arbitrary and resulted from her limited knowledge and understanding of South Asian languages and cultures. At the same time, she mentions that her mistake originated from necessity of her framing the identity-based boundaries of Asian American identity and literature, and she implicitly suggests that this is what enabled her to read Asian American literature as a “literature of protest and exile, searching for and claiming a ‘home’ or longing for a final ‘homecoming’” (xiii). Later in the preface, however, she argues that the cultural nationalist approach to Asian American representation always excludes certain parts of Asian America, particularly women, and renders them invisible because of its narrowness in definition. With that said, she celebrates the publication of the anthology as bearing witness to “many ways of being Asian American today” (xiii).

What is problematic in Elaine Kim’s argument is the obscurity of what she means by many ways of being Asian American: who is the Asian American that Kim refers to vis-à-vis non-Asian Americans in the U.S., and how can one be such an Asian American when his or her identity supposedly remains un-decided? What these questions inform us is that the world-literature writers positioned “at home in the world” have not been able to overcome Charlie Chan, an incarnation of hegemonic anti-Asian discourse in the U.S. that formulates what Kim refers to as Asian American particularly in terms of race. In other words, what makes them Asian American is not so much the way they claim their multiple identities as from the way they all have to face Charlie Chan, alive or not. In fact, what is not fully articulated in Elaine’s preface is that the racial configuration of Asian American identity is not so much fully autonomous

and nationalist as arbitrarily constructed and contingently outlined. Namely, the identity-based politics of Asian America is not so essentialist in nature; as a contingent form, it took shape during the course of the cultural and political engagement of Asian Americans with American culture which has created the fantasy of Charlie Chan. He becomes not only fictional but also primordial figure of Asian Americans against whom the war of position over the legitimacy of *true* Asian America has taken place on both intra-racial and inter-racial levels. In brief, Charlie Chan is tantamount to an imagined figure of the primordial Asian American that white American nationalism produced during the course of internalization of alien Asians into the U.S. national body. Both cultural nationalist and postmodern pluralist formations of Asian America could emerge successively in the never-ending process of overcoming Charlie Chan—i.e., denying him, adoring him, and reviving him simultaneously due to his paradoxical presence of hauntology as both *being* and *non-being* Asian American.

Against this backdrop, Charlie Chan is figured as a fictional Asian American with the “hauntological” power to make diverse subjects with irreducible differences become placed under the rubric “Asian American” in terms of race and gender. In this regard, it is not so much fictional as material, for the apparitional figure constantly creates, refreshes, and perpetuates an *imagined* nation of Asian America that continues to remind its subjects of their belonging to it. It is as firm and solid as a bronze statue entitled “Asian American” in the middle of the U.S. As Hagedorn stated earlier, Charlie Chan may be in a coma, yet he is as alive as ever invariably, working as the a priori origin of Asian America in the heart of anti-Asian America: that is, an origin forgettable and unforgettable simultaneously as long as white supremacy does not disappear

forever. His hauntology is thus equivalent to a gap in the contemporary Asian American subjectivity denying Asian American identity, for the gap continues to remind them of Charlie Chan, and at the same time, identifies them with him. As a result, contemporary Asian American subjects become hysterically sensitive about their being stereotyped like Charlie Chan, as Hagedorn implicitly reveals, “*We continue to assert and explore who we are as Asians, Asian Americans, and citizens of the world. Yes, we read and we write as acts of resistance and rebellion*” (*CCID2* xxxii, my emphasis). In her cosmopolitan identification of Asian Americans as world citizens beyond the racial boundary of Asian America, Hagedorn shows how Asian Americans can be themselves, yet only through continuously asserting and exploring their identity and posturing themselves as oppositional via acts of writing. In other words, she is in fact unable to articulate precisely *who they are*, except for insistently, if not hysterically, acting rebelliously.

One of the coeditors of 1991 *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, Shirley Hune, reiterates how Asian Americans can be themselves in terms of the origin and mission of Asian American studies. Like Hagedorn, Hune continuously reminds her readers what it means to be Asian American when comparing and contrast what she calls “old area studies” with Asian American studies as part of ethnic studies. She argues that the former is oriented by “Euro-Americanism” based on the elite-oriented structure with the support of the U.S. government. On the contrary, she defines the latter as commissioned to carry out a protest against the existing educational structure that excludes it, and Asian American specialists as “agents of resistance against the social order of [white America]” (3-4). Both Hagedorn

and Hune persevere in their efforts to position Asian Americans on the anti-hegemonic side of resistance as a way of defining their identity. Then, suppose that their obsessed self-fashioning as a resistant would not be an eventual solution to rid their identity of Charlie Chan? In a radically reversed manner, what would happen if Charlie Chan were eventually dead? Would it be then that Asian Americans become no longer themselves defined under the rubric “Asian American” since Chan is, whether fictional or not, Asian American, or has the term “Asian American” come to have a totally new meaning as fully detached from what he has signified before? As I suggest in Chapter 2, how do we deal with the paradox that the only way for Asian Americans to represent themselves is continuously performing stereotyped Asian characters? B. D. Wong, who played Song Liling in David H. Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, even confesses that he could be a different kind of Asian from other stereotyped ones only by playing the Song character in the play (Zia 115). Suffice it to say that the character Song is the very “good Chinese man” whom the editors of *The Big Aiiieeeee!* harshly reproach for fulfilling “white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass” (xiii).

As a paradoxical figure of hauntology, Charlie Chan would never disappear, if not becoming a legend. No Asian American can possibly exist without his ghost lurking behind him insofar as his refashioning of self-identity as performing “resistance and rebellion,” on the one hand, becomes realized as antithetical to Chan, and on the other, becomes affiliated indispensably with him. I consider that Chan is what makes Asian Americans keep *becoming* themselves, incessantly haunting and inspiring them as the primordial figure of origin; at the same time, the configuration of Chan as imagined and primordial prevents them from fully *being* him in their effort to overcome him.

Moreover, the gap of their being and becoming Chan is in fact an ontological point of reference where the usefulness and effectiveness of the identity-bounded cultural nationalism of Asian America could originate, has become obsolete, and in turn, recently started yielding diverse attempts to replace itself with alternative politics. That is to say, Charlie Chan is not simply a fictional character in U.S. popular culture that reflects the racism and ignorance of white America about Asian America; the hauntological power of his pervasiveness and permanence in American society transforms him, paradoxically, into an archetype.

The gap between Charlie Chan and contemporary Asian Americans is, therefore, equivalent to an epistemological void that Charlie Chan as a primordial figure of Asian America functions as: he can haunt, frustrate, and inspire them, but can neither be identified with them nor let them fully free from his apparitional power. In the following section, based on the discussion of Charlie Chan's figurative meaning, I will discuss further the issue of Asian American representation. Chan is still alive and coexists with contemporary Asian Americans to such an extent that he reflects the past face of Asian America, affects its present face, and foreshadows its future face, during the course of which he keeps remaining the kernel of Asian American imaginary. The following analysis of the 1982 murder case of Vincent Chin will bear witness to how the hauntology of Charlie Chan works in the recent history of Asian America; more specifically, I examine via the case study how Charlie Chan can haunt, frustrate, and inspire modern American subjects. "Who killed Vincent Chin?" film director Christine

Choy⁸ implicitly asks in the 1987 documentary film. I would answer that Charlie Chan has to do with Vincent Chin's tragic death; moreover, he worked as the gap which not only differentiated Chin from the fictional Chan but also haunted Chin to transform into Chan, the Asian American who supposedly never gets angry and complains.

Fantasy of Asian American Identity

The question of how Asian Americans are perceived as 'permanent aliens' in the U.S. is a common topic in Asian American studies. Frank H. Wu states that "where are you from" is a question anyone with an Asian face is continuously asked in the U.S. In his essay "Where Are You Really From," he mentions that Asian Americans' being mistaken for a foreigner has become their routine experience to the extent that they cannot be a real American. In everyday life in the United States, such awkward situations happen casually and regularly, and affect Asians and Asian Americans deeply, placing them in the status of permanent, yet never complete assimilation. Due to the popular circulation of knowledge informed by postcolonial studies in academia, the misrecognition of the Other has become a constant point of reference to support oppositional positions of "minoritized" in opposition to so-called epistemic violence⁹; our identities are constituted, exchanged, and recognized by the hegemonic social order justifying the legitimacy of existing arbitrary social structures. Given how the cognitive knowledge of 'who we are' is predetermined, we are subject to the pre-existing system

⁸ *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* is a 1987 documentary film directed by Christine Choy and produced by Renee Tajima-Pena about the death of Vincent Chin. It was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

⁹ Gayatri C. Spivak theorizes the notion of "epistemic violence" in her renowned article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

of signs that creates a kind of epistemological gap between our knowledge of ourselves and how we are referred to.

The recognition of ones' identity as Asian, for instance, takes place when the public eye sees something in them that does not fully belong to them. It ascribes to their being a kind of fantasy that makes them "typical" Asians in terms of racial identification. Parts of their bodily appearances become determinants of their racial identity, functioning as an abstract sign that automatically refers to some concept of "Asian," and their ontological being has its meaning only in relation to the conceptualized. Their subjectivity thus becomes regulated by, and subject to, the pre-established system of racial identification insofar as it certifies "who they are." It refers to the way in which any Asian American happens to be recognized as Charlie Chan. "Who they are," in this sense, indicates, as Louis Althusser might put it, an ideological subject that the contingent and arbitrary rule of social agreements, however biased, constitutes. It is no wonder that Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as a "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (*RFUS* 55).

It is interesting to see the way in which particular parts of "what they are made of"—hair color, the shape of eyes, facial features—become the universal referent of "who they are." They not only represent but also substitute for the imagined totality of their ontological being. In other words, their identitarian self has its ontological meaning reduced to the conceptual formality of what it means to be Asian American. The process of racial identification, as a result, occurs beyond their control and will in figuring out their self-identity. It keeps escaping and defying their basic desire to

differentiate their individual self from that of others. Essential to an understanding of how racial identification takes place is obviously such an uncontrollability of representations. Asian American identity exists as an abstract sign that makes sense in the context of the conceptual Asian like Charlie Chan—for example, the imagined as well as hegemonic system of Asian stereotypes. Within the discursive formality of the identity are imaginary elements that seem both extraneous and intrinsic to Asian American ontology. This epistemological difference in their self-identity stands for the gap. Fundamentally, the gap emerges when the hegemonic authority of public gaze defines “who they are” as typical of Asian Americans. That is, it comes out of the ontological inconsistency and contradiction of the representational system of Asian American identity vis-à-vis the totalitarian authority to recognize them “as such” in accordance with the pre-ontological formality of the conceptual Asian American.

Nonetheless, Asian Americans’ bodies superfluously signify something excessive, more than “who they are,” an elusive meaning that is not always clear and definable vis-à-vis their racial identity. The discrepancy between the formalistic meaning of Asian American identity and the self-reflective or self-referential meaning of their subjective self consists in an indefinable dimension, or an ontological gap, within the identity. Metaphorically, it works as Charlie Chan’s apparitional power encompassing Asian Americans’ distinctive individualities within themselves. This apparition keeps haunting them, evoking others’ temptation to recognize the former as symbolic of the conceptual Asian. Given this, that Asian Americans’ distinctive subjectivity negates any given identity in terms of, say, race, can be seen as an antagonistic gesture of political resistance to U.S. culture, i.e., the public eye that

produces the stereotype of Asians as a fixed form of truth. Constituted as a cognitive system of knowledge that falls within the realm of common sense, stereotype rather turns Asian Americans into an appendix to the symbolic apparition or uncanny double that reifies their identity in the typical formality of “Asian”—that is, racial fantasy.

Asian Americans become a puppet-like agent of Charlie Chan’s apparitional power evoking something in themselves more than themselves, which is projected upon their identity. It creates a division within the system of “commonsensical” representation—the conceptual (fantasy) vs. the original (imagination). The apparitional power of fantasy—invisible but effective to the public eye—is what combines the two for the sake of the communicative exchange of their identity as a cognitive sign. At the same time, the apparitional fantasy remains elusive and unidentifiable, making the gap between “who they are” and “who they are seen as.” Simply put, the former is the real of them whose subjectivity remains neither fully symbolized nor properly interpellated, an unfathomable dimension of Asian American identity that resists their being completely identified as a typical Asian as a whole. On the contrary, the latter refers to the symbolic figure of the Asian American that the public eye recognizes as one of Charlie Chan Asians.

Although it is our fate to be social subjects dictated by the representational system that constitutes our identitarian position, the gap of the subject between real and symbolic never comes to a closure. The identitarian system of representation can maintain itself through social agreements for the communication between self and other. At stake in the system is the uncontrollability of representations intrinsic to the nature of the agreements making for the idealistic achievement of universal communication in

totality, yet it always remains incomplete. W. J. T. Mitchell observes, “Representation is that by which we make our will known and, simultaneously, that which alienates our will from ourselves in both the aesthetic and political spheres” (21). The system of representation, such as languages and bodily appearances, is a social construct making possible the communicative process of identification and, simultaneously, creating an epistemological void that prevents the communication from being fully accomplished. This gap is where fantasy with a spectral power operates in the process of identification and fills up the gap, and thus secures the discursive certainty of a community in which the ideological transparency of a hegemonic discourse comes true.

In light of racial identification, the apparitional power of fantasy operates paradoxically with a double function. First, it creates the gap of the subject between real and symbolic. Second, it disavows inherent antagonisms in the community by attempting to close the gap, turning its members into all identifiable subjects naturally belonging to it. In *Orientalism*, for instance, Edward Said criticizes a Western tradition of colonialism for producing knowledge about the East as an imagined construct that all “Eastern” societies are fundamentally similar insofar as they are conceptualized as antithetical to the Western counterparts. His point, though, is not that the a priori knowledge called Orientalism distorts some Oriental essence; rather, Orientalism, as he puts it, “operates as representations” (273). Granted, the reason that Western knowledge of the East becomes problematic is not so much that the West distorts some sort of the primordial essence of the East; rather, it is that its hegemonic system of representation is arbitrarily closing the gap between the real (unidentifiable) and the symbolic (representable) of the East, leaving no room for the East to be otherwise,

namely, to be further imaginable as something the West is not in the know about. Here, the notion of the real is an imaginary entity that always comes after the signification of the symbolic as a social construct, such that the real structurally originates in the unknowable gap with the symbolic. In other words, the Western fantasy of the East gives birth to the symbolic essence of the East via Orientalism by turning the East into an identifiable form of knowledge, getting rid of an imaginary essence believed to remain un-representable and unidentifiable. At the same time, such a hegemonic system of Western representation of the East also creates a fantasy about the indefinable entity of imaginary essence, the real, of the East leaving the gap open. Within this paradoxical framework, the East as an object of representation becomes stuck within the endless circle of Orientalism by being neither the fully Orientalism-free East nor the East as an authentic Western knowledge.

Hence, the double function of fantasy is a sheer paradox both closing and opening the gap between real and symbolic. Nevertheless, it is an effective methodological framework to come up with alternative knowledge in analyzing the ideological formality of identitarian representation. In an effort to compose a symbolic fiction of the community for its imagined unity, the public fantasy can work as a counter-hegemonic discourse that disrupts the systemic totality of the community. By ambivalently excluding and concealing the “real” dimension of the Asian identity, the stereotypical knowledge of Asian Americans sustains its ideological authority only precariously as Homi K. Bhabha points out in *The Location of Culture*: “[T]he stereotype...is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (66).

The public fantasy in its apparitional effect contributes to the construction and regulation of the reality that consistently attempts to reduce anyone with an Asian face to the conceptual Asian. Nonetheless, it also contradicts itself to the extent that the (ideological) fantasy cannot fully *imagine* and recognize the real of the conceptual identity, which creates its epistemological void between *being* and *becoming*.

When it comes to the conceptual but hegemonic identity of “real American,” the gap between its being and becoming never comes to a close in the contemporary life of Americans. The fantasy that real Americans exist relies on the contingent perception of what is un-American, and defining the former means the incessant exclusion of the latter by putting them in the permanent process of *becoming*. Its becoming is not to perceive the real American as a positive set of features, i.e., the way it actually is, but to discern in it the traces of failed identification of its *being*. It is true that Asian Americans’ ontological gap between being and becoming results from the hegemonic presence of real Americans, white Americans; however, the latter is also put in the process of becoming to claim their identitarian position as real American. I perceive the abstraction of real American, as a universal “form” in which individuals as particular content engage in power struggles with one another to gain a dominant position to claim their dominant legitimacy of being real Americans. In my dissertation, the question is not how certain individuals become more hegemonic in order to claim a more central and authentic identitarian position than the others do. Rather, it is how individuals with their given identities fail to perform “who they are.” This is what exposes the ambivalent symptoms of both anxiety and desire, indicating an eruption of the gap of the subject between its sense of self and identity.

In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall suggests that cultural identity is a matter of becoming as well as of being (393). In terms of identity politics, individuals’ identitarian being takes shape in the deferred and incomplete process of becoming via mimicry, misidentification, and hybridization among themselves. The idea that identity is an abstract position essentially detached from its bearer inversely tells us about why an identitarian position is misunderstood as essentialist, for identity is what results from closing the gap of the subject by turning it into an identitarian self: an apparitional power to reduce people with Asian faces to Charlie Chan. The radical idea that there is no identity without being essentialist signifies a totalitarian gesture of defining some contingent in essentialist terms and perpetuating its constitutive knowledge as permanent truth. In this regard, Hall praises diasporic identities as anti-essentialist against the closed system of identity politics (394).

At the same time, however, the determination of identity as a permanent form of truth is paradoxical, for the achievement of its universality structurally relies on oppositional particulars that remain excluded from it. The relationship between being and becoming is thus not only contingent and constitutive but also distinctive as far as the epistemological spectrum of individuals’ knowledge of themselves is focused on the universal affirmation of their being as a whole, part of which nonetheless remains unfathomable and unidentifiable in the never-ending process of becoming. They strive to grasp the so-called Whole of Being to get a hegemonic position in claiming their identity as universal, as “real Asian American,” only to remain incomplete. With that said, the debate over the real vs. fake of Asian Americans is not only taken for granted but also absurd paradoxically; the a priori concept of real Asian American is too

phantasmagorical to be grasped and realized as a whole in the never-ending process of becoming, rather than being. It is no wonder that Jessica Hagedorn can only ambiguously identify Asian American writers as world citizens, namely, people geographically born in various places of trans-Asian America—the writerly subject in the permanent process of becoming oppositional and rebellious (*CCID2* xxxii). To put it another way, identity politics in the postmodern era, on a theoretical level, has recourse to fantasy of ethnic identity, being not so much essentialist as *positioanlist* in nature. For, as witnessed earlier, Asian Americans are defined as being oppositional and rebellious to the hegemonic system of American nationalism which facilitates uneven relations of people within its nationalist framework in terms of the normalized forms of hegemonic categorical difference, such as race, gender, sexuality, culture, and so on.

Who Killed Vincent Chin?

Fantasies that Asian Americans are perpetual aliens are far from frivolous, and so is the apparitional power of Charlie Chan. Similar cases of misidentification are part of a history of hate crimes, including the now well-known murder of Vincent Chin in 1982.¹⁰ The 1980s marked a time of economic depression that facilitated the spread of anti-Asian discourse throughout the U.S., which was triggered by the American fear of the Japanese economic dominance. The rapid rise of the Japanese auto industry as a threat to its American counterpart, for instance, evoked a mixture of fear and anxiety. As Robert G. Lee suggests in *Orientalism*, the Japanese economic threat spurred a reincarnation of the “yellow peril,” an image that first became fueled by Japanese

¹⁰ See Robert Lee’s *Orientalism Asian Americas in Popular Culture* on pp. 215-22.

imperialism in the early part of the twentieth century.¹¹ The 1980s' U.S. economic downturn particularly wreaked havoc on the local economy of the Detroit area, "the automobile capital of the world," and amplified Americans' repressed anxiety about Asian invasions. White Americans vented their racial anxiety and fear through the naked articulation of anti-Japanese sentiment. For instance, a number of charity events were publicly held and, in exchange for donating money, let people smash Japanese-built cars with baseball bats.¹² In the midst of such anti-Asian sentiments, Ronald Ebens, a white assembly line worker, and his stepson, Michael Nitz, mistook Vincent Chin, a Chinese American automobile engineer, for Japanese and beat him to death with a baseball bat.¹³ Nonetheless, the killers served no jail term, and the lightness of the sentence shocked many people. In response to the sentence, a columnist remarked, "You have raised the ugly ghost of racism, suggesting...that the lives of the killers are of great and continuing value to society, implying they are of greater value than the life of the slain victim" (Zia 60).

Despite their clear guilt at Chin's murder, Circuit Judge Charles Kaufman allowed the killers to go free out of jail, and made a controversial comment, as well-known Asian American activist and scholar Helen Zia quotes in her *Asian American Dreams*: "These weren't the kind of men you send to jail. You don't make the

¹¹ Concerning the anti-Asian discourse spreading through the U.S. in the 1980s, see Lee's "After LA" in *Orientalism: Asian Americas in Popular Culture*.

¹² In their 1987 documentary film *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Pena show footage of a horde of frenzied white Americans violently smashing with baseball bats and kicking automobiles imported from Japan. It also shows that they are giving shouts mixed with joy and anger on top of the Japanese cars, and other spectators around the scene are wildly excited at seeing the cars demolished.

¹³ As to hate crimes against Asian Americans, see more of Helen Zia's *Asian American Dreams*, and Timothy Fong's *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: beyond the Model Minority*.

punishment fit the crime; you make the punishment fit the criminal” (60). The question in the statement is obviously what “kind of men” he is referring to and how these men are different from what he means by “the criminal.” For Kaufman, “the kind of men” for whom the judge found innocent enough not to be sent to jail was not a universal category, but a particular one. In other words, when sentencing the murderers, Kaufman did not take them as *any* kind of men but as a *specific* kind, breaking the code that “we are all equal before the law.” In his judgment, a white person’s crime against a minority victim was not considered severe enough to be sent to jail. The only element that makes them privileged and particular in comparison to other common criminals is obviously their racial identity as white. Kaufman’s decision could be made as such in consideration of “who killed who,” rather than the act of killing itself, legally producing “the kind of men” who commit murder without going to jail. Kaufman’s decision evokes the proverb, “Condemn the offense and not its perpetrator,” but with a twist. His judgment ended up differentiating the perpetrators and Chin as victim in racialized terms.

The Vincent Chin case reminds us of a particular kind of epistemic violence that is associated with race. Kaufman’s sentence suggests a peculiar recognition of the perpetrators that completely identifies their ontological being with their racial identity, and predetermines what kind of men they are: the terms of racial profiling. Their individual subjectivities are both reduced to and concealed from their racial identity as the social construct of whiteness. The anti-social or even anarchistic dimension of their subjectivities is repressed in their racial identity as such, and this process of racial identification is officially confirmed by Judge Kaufman’s legal sentence, a judgmental

form of public confession to artificially produce truth. That is, they could not but be “the kind of men,” whites, not going to jail for a hate crime. Their racial identity takes over and fully substantiates their ontological subjectivity. In the murder case, no one ended up responsible for the death of Vincent Chin. This makes his death not that of a universal man who is equal before the law but that of a particular minoritized subject that is not equally protected by the law. The perpetrators’ racial identity of whiteness neutralizes their racist subjectivity. In reality, the contemporary history of hate crimes against Asian Americans reveals that the motives for killing them are too simple, as Robert G. Lee observes: “[I]t did not matter that the victim was Chinese, or Korean, or Vietnamese; the mere good rule overrode ethnicity.... In these cases it didn’t matter what ethnicity or nationality the victims really were; the only significant issue was that they were the gook” (217).

The notion of the *gook* is a derogatory term for Asians and still being used today in the U.S. Even though the ethnic slur originates in U.S. soldiers stationed in the Philippines in the early twentieth century, it has been widely used among soldiers to refer to any dark-skinned non-Americans.¹⁴ This term is a notion not only racially but also culturally specified in that it signifies Asians whose languages and cultural manners are felt to be offensive by Americans. In the U.S., the gook is considered very offensive accordingly. In a highly publicized incident, Senator John McCain used it in 2000 to refer to his former Vietnamese captors during the Vietnam War he participated in, and then apologized to the Vietnamese community at large: “I hate the gooks. I will

¹⁴ According to *Dictionary.com*, the term “gook” generically refers to a native of the Pacific islands, Africa, Japan, China, Korea or any European country except England and usually a brown-skinned or Oriental non-Christian.

hate them as long as I live...I was referring to my prison guards and I will continue to refer to them in language that might offend” (Ma). In fact, there is a debate over the etymological origin of the gook. For example, Lan Cao and Himilce Novas claim in *Everything You Need to Know about Asian-American History* that “gook” comes from the Korean word for “country” (10). Similarly, Robert G. Lee claims in *Orientalism* that it is concerned with a “bastardization” of the Korean words such as ▪ ▪ *Hangoon* (Korea) or ▪ ▪ *Migook* (America) (11). Yet these explanations appear groundless concerning numerous examples of the word used before the Korean War.¹⁵ In spite of different assertions on the origin of the word “gook,” it is certain that this term rather erases specific differences of Asian peoples and becomes a universal sign in the U.S. to refer to Asian-related races, cultures, nations, and geographies—namely, a signifier that not so much specifies them as generalizes them as a universalizing referent. In this regard, the term gook operates as similarly as Charlie Chan does in light of his apparitional power: a universal referent of Asian Americans that erases their specific differences and reduces them to itself.

The lightness of the sentence in the murder case of Vincent Chin was made possible by the way that both the term gook and Charlie Chan are effectively operating in U.S. society with their apparitional power of racist fantasy. We can see the preposterous sentencing of Ebens and Nitz as a radical case to set up a condition and presupposition of what it means to fully *be*—rather than incompletely *become*—white at its purest level. The imagined notion of *real white* comes into being as realized via

¹⁵ Regarding the usage of the term gook that pre-dates the Korean War, see the following sources: William Safire’s “On Language; Goo-Goo Eyes,” *The New York Times* (May 7, 1995) and the PBS radio transcript of America 1900 on “Spirit of the Age.”

the bodily presence of the criminals in terms of the abstraction of white race through which not only the perpetrators' but also the victim's identities become reified as purely racialized in their dialectical relation: white vs. Asian. Given the lightness of the sentence, Chin's ontological being was reduced to a particular minority in court, as a pure abstraction of the gook that the law neither regards as normative nor treats as equal compared to white Americans. When it comes to the identitarian subject of real American, the U.S. court allowed Ebens and Nitz to identify completely with the racial abstraction of the real American insofar as its racial privilege lets the criminals go free out of the prison. On a theoretical level, the subject's absolute identification with the purely abstract entity of the real American signifies its success in removing the otherness in its own ontological being and thus being the purest form of identity: that is, being fully independent of the other. The pure whiteness of the criminals becomes realized as fully as it becomes hegemonic in identifying them as real Americans.

In *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Georg Hegel concentrates on the concept of struggle in the dialectical formation of subjectivity. His well-known dialectical division, the master vs. slave, is clearly indicative of their uneven relation. In Hegel, the freedom to gain the true sense of self is not the subject's recognizing the objectified other in self-reflectivity; rather, that is its eliminating the other from itself to consolidate its hegemonic—whether master or slave—position and thus to become independent of the other permanently. Nonetheless, the Hegelian subject is aware that its dialectical positionality as either master or slave relies on the other, without which it cannot survive, realizing its ontological limitation as such. This is a critical moment when the ontological gap of the subject erupts, separating its *becoming* from its *being*. That is, the

subject as either master or slave can never *be* the other, for their relationship always remains ontologically distanced in the perpetual process of becoming. Yet the relationship between master and slave is different from that of the Adornian model in which both subject and other are objectively distinct in self-reflectivity. In Hegel, their distanced relationship is rather what evokes the desire and struggle for mutual identification not only to remove one from the other but also to become a free independent subject.

Moreover, Hegel insists that the relationship take on one's desire to dominate the other for the sake of its self-reliance, which nevertheless ends up impossible and incomplete in that it is suicidal. In the Hegelian dialectic, the master's position is indebted to that of the slave insofar as the latter, i.e., the enemy, is what makes the former ontologically consistent in itself. In other words, the true sense of freedom for the subject in Hegel is to either become the enemy or eliminate it, either of which means the death of the subject. The Hegelian subject essentially attempts to carry out the "absolute negation" of the selves in a fashion to negate their own otherness in themselves and to "raise their self-certainty (about existing for-self) to truth in the 'other' as well as in themselves" (Hegel 55). Rather than pretend to remain objective and distanced in treating the other, the Hegelian subject strives to secure its identitarian position in light of the life-death struggle between master and slave. The eventual way to obtain freedom from its own ontological limitation that the subject cannot *be* in-and-for itself as a whole is paradoxically negating its positive being dependent on that of the other. This illustrates the subject's death instinct towards "nothingness," which makes our knowledge on the subject inexorably entangled in inconsistencies and contradictions.

In Hegel, the subject's death instinct, an ontological abyss that remains unfathomable in its ideological edifice, is the only way to realize its "pure existence-for-self" (Hegel 55).

Identity is apparitional in nature, for as discussed earlier, we all can become a/the "real Asian American" but never will be, and the resulting gap between our being and becoming is where the subject *endlessly* strives to secure its identitarian position in light of the life-death struggle against the other in-and-for itself. The realization of identity is its purist objectification in that, in neoliberal capitalism, identity is equivalent to a commodity imbued with a cultural capital of dual meanings: an owned property of the subject feeling happy (with no more work) and an alienated property of the subject feeling miserable (with endless work) as Karl Marx teaches us.¹⁶ In *Race and Resistance*, Viet T. Nguyen describes Asian American identity as the cultural capital of both accommodation and resistance in U.S. society, and it well explains the point I am making here (143-44): on the one hand, Asian Americans make a good relationship with the society that praises them as a model minority, as a civil subject fully assimilable to the mainstream; on the other hand, they make a bad relationship with the society that stereotypes their identity as a yellow peril, viciously alienating them from the mainstream. Asian American identity has its multiple meanings with an apparitional effect that changes the ontological meaning of its referent and at the same time, reduces them back to their archetype: Charlie Chan or the gook. While the identity acts as a

¹⁶ In *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx saw the relationship between the worker and his labor as antagonistic: the more the latter exerts himself in his work the more his labor alienates him; further, the worker feels happy and at home when his labor alienates him. Hence, Marx says, "His labor is, therefore, not voluntary but forced, it is *forced labor*" (74). On the one hand, his labor is what brings him into being as worker. On the other, his engagement in the capitalist activity of production is to invest his labor into nature and thus to obtain his 'property' to establish, in Hegelian terms, "the condition of possibility of human self-possession—of one's body, interiority, and life direction" ("Intimacies" 200).

conduit that connects Asian Americans with the society for their mutual understanding, this communicative sign always signifies itself as inconsistent, contradictory, and, as Nguyen puts it, “hypocritical” in representing Asian Americans as a whole. It is no wonder Nguyen observes that Asian Americans are facing the “crisis of representation over ideological diversity” in identity politics (9).

Identity works as a vanishing mediator that connects the hegemonic system of ideological reality with the identitarian subject as the constituent of the former. Such a vanishing mediator as identity, through its apparitional as well as self-effacing effect, plays a role in maintaining the systematic order of the reality by transforming the pre-ontological chaotic multitude, namely, individuals with identities, into, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, “the semblance of a positive objective order of reality” (*Ticklish* 158). The Hegelian dialectic shows that the subject comes to have its identity rendered apparitional and thus precarious. Simultaneously, the identity never completely sits itself apart from its proprietor because of its dialectical relationship with it, the subject, in terms of the life/death struggle, which makes the mutual gap never closed. This gap can be translated as a minimal void that prevents the subject from *being*, that is, fully getting identified with, its identitarian self, which potentially gives rise to the totalitarian racist subject: being fully identified as white, “the kind of men” who can kill Vincent Chin, or anyone with a darker skin, with impunity.

Earlier, I threw out a question, what would happen if Charlie Chan were dead? Allegorically, what would happen when a King (the subject) realized that his kingship originates not so much in him as in his crown (his identitarian insignia)? He would implement terrorism to claim his royal authority and convince people that his kingship

is God-given, absolute, and inherent. The most successful dictator would be the one who can completely get rid of the gap between his subjectivity and his identity, which endows him with his authoritarian power; a reign of terror represents a power struggle for the dictator to preserve his totalitarian authority by combining himself with the very power he is wielding. It is nothing but totalitarian. It makes human subjectivities fully identified with the social construct of identitarian positions at its most radical.

Individuals' identities do not fully take shape until they wear their brassard, a symbolic insignia, which turns them into the subjects subordinate to the identities. A Korean proverb thus says that a position makes its occupant, not the other way around. An absolute monarch can be himself only when his ontological being can fully identify with his crown, a supreme insignia that endows him with his kingship and completes his royal identity. In a similar vein, an individual deals with the gap with his/her identity to maintain his/her hegemonic subject-position and remain visible with an identitarian position, and this explains how identity politics works today. If they fail to manage the gap properly, it becomes fatal, as witnessed in the Vincent Chin case.

In the murder case of Vincent Chin, no one wound up responsible for the young Chinese American man's death. Who killed him? No one did in the practical sense that killing people is so serious a crime as to have the criminal punished and put in prison for a long time, if not capital punishment. No one ended up in jail for Chin's death. The court with its totalitarian authority closed the gap between Chin and his identitarian position determined by the apparitional effect of Charlie Chan and the gook, including the gap between the killers and the privileged identity of whiteness. There is an obvious difference between the two gaps that are fully closed as follows, though: the first gap

that is closed turns Chin into a so-called bare life (*zōē*) that Giorgio Agamben defines as a “being to be killed with impunity” (65). This life refers to an inhuman condition as excluded from the sovereign state of the U.S. which not only produces modern humanity by giving protection to citizens, ‘real American,’ but also gains hegemonic authority by denying it to noncitizens, as it were, the gook. The bare life is put in a state of permanent exception accordingly. On the contrary, the second gap that is closed turns Ebens and Nitz into what Agamben calls a “political life” (*bio*) as fully included and internalized within the zone of sovereign projection and within the civilization of modern humanity.¹⁷

Illuminating Asian America More Deeply

Stuart Hall observes that identity is constituted “not outside but within representation” through which we do not produce additional positions or meanings of subjects to replace or substitute the previous one, yet it “discover[s] places from which to speak” (402). In the same vein, our alternative subject positions within the existential frame of a given identity come not from outside but from inside of our representational subjectivity, bearing an ontological gap between identity and subjectivity. Granted, this gap works as a vanishing mediator that connects a bare life to a political being, gets the life an identitarian position, and simultaneously, destabilizes the very fixed connection,

¹⁷ In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben explores a theoretical concept called the “state of exception” to examine the paradox of humanity in the rise of the nation-states. In his vision of political life that continues to produce those excluded from the legal protection of sovereignty, he opposes it as a kind of brutal force that restrains every individual’s body even beyond law. His idea of the state of exception thus aims to dismantle the binary division between political life and bare life, and to erase it to restore humanity to those universally excluded who have been denied citizenship (177-180).

which gives rise to alternative meanings in our subjectivity. Charlie Chan is still alive both connecting and destabilizing Asian Americans' relationship with him. In other words, due to the apparitional power of Charlie Chan, Vincent Chin had to be sacrificed by being mistaken for Japanese, yet his death also provided Asian Americans with an opportunity to become visible and consolidated with the formation of a distinctive identity within white America: the Vincent Chan case served as a rallying point for the Asian American community, and Ebens and Nitz were put on trial at least for violating Chin's civil rights, despite the criminal charges brought down. Because of the public pressure from a coalition of many Asian ethnic organizations, Chin's death served as the foundation for a pan-ethnic Asian American movement (Yip).

Therefore, what is at stake in a critique of Asian American identity politics is not so much how identity politics excludes positive and legitimate subjects within itself as how the excluded in an ethnic identity come to haunt, frustrate, and inspire the subjects occupying hegemonic identitarian positions. In this sense, Charlie Chan is not only alive but also useful in the reformation of Asian America even in the twentieth-first century. The permanent gap left excluded in Asian American identity comes to us as a promise for the possibility of expanding the democratic values in liberal society and, as Judith Butler puts it, "rendering [our polity] more inclusive, more dynamic and more concrete" ("RU" 13). What should be noted is that these possibilities do not always come from the outside in a way that alternative subjects, writings, and politics continue to flow in or develop by expanding the territorial space of Asian America in terms of race, gender, sex, and geography; rather, my point is that they are more often than not already immanent in the current identity-based politics of Asian America, waiting to

awake, rise, and get illuminated and thus adding to Asian American literary studies unknowingly ignored meanings and methodologies of Asian American critique. In a broad sense, this is what my dissertation contributes to the extant scholarship of Asian American literary studies.

Granted, my dissertation focuses on the gap between the subject and its identity vis-à-vis the critique of Asian American identity politics. The notion of difference embedded in the term gap does not refer to a difference between subjects, races, genders, and sexualities; rather, it indicates the inconsistency and contradiction of the subject within itself, as a critical point of reference where new—i.e., yet undiscovered—meanings can emerge while diversifying, strengthening, and reforming the extant epistemological establishment of Asian America. As a result, my dissertation does not primarily look for alternative ways of replacing the extant format of Asian American identity politics with a new one, or deconstructing it for another like the recent scholarship informed by pluralism or transnationalism. In fact, while difference is a fundamental notion for identity politics, it is also its Achilles heel. It is true that, on the one hand, the identity-based politics of Asian America serves as a foundation for political and social visibility, a process of collective naming and selective authorization. Judith Butler thus points out that identity politics is essential to the formation of democratic polities, and at the same time, constituted through exclusions. Those excluded from the formalistic formation of any particular subject-positions within the polity necessarily return to remind the member subjects of their absence (“RU” 11-2). My project has its goal to theorize, catch, and rearticulate the meanings of those excluded turning back. Butler considers that any particular formation of subject-position

in terms of identity politics works as a constitutive force of obtaining hegemony within the democratic polity and simultaneously ends up incomplete because of the excluded from it: “[T]he constitutive outside of the subject can never become fully inside or immanent” (“RU” 12). My dissertation, thereof, concentrates on the gap where the current establishment of Asian America does not complete its full meaning, getting away from the rather exhaustive war of positions in the current scholarship of Asian American literary studies.

Informed by post-Freudian psychoanalysis, my dissertation explores the way in which the stereotypes of Asian Americans operate as fundamental to the constitution of both Asian America and white America. It makes use of psychoanalysis as a methodological tool to analyze the dialectical dynamics between Asians in America and the gaze of white-centered American society where the former’s exotic presence evokes the desire and anxiety of the latter simultaneously. Within this framework, Charlie Chan is the ambivalent point of reference as an object of desire and denial, to which both Asian America and white America keep going back and forth in their perpetual process of exclusion and assimilation to each other. Given that, my dissertation collects some representative cultural products of Asian America as touchstones of Asian American representation. I consider the collection an ideological matrix of the symbolic reality that constitutes the uneven relations of our lives in terms of race, gender, and sexuality and takes them for granted. Simultaneously, this collection makes both white and Asian Americas negotiate with each other to attend to both intra-racial and inter-racial anxiety and trauma caused by their racial, cultural, sexual, geographical encounters at various levels of historical and political contexts—that is, to repress the ontological gap of the

national body of multicultural America. As a result, the Asian American cultural products I chose as critical objects of study in this dissertation are widely dispersed in time—mostly in the second half of the twentieth century; moreover, they all are representative of each of their different periods that gave birth to them in American history.

As a result, I select the following works of Asian America knowledge production: Giacomo Puccini's 1904 classic opera *Madame Butterfly*, David H. Hwang's 1988 postcolonial play *M. Butterfly*, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's 1961 musical film *Flower Drum Song*, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's 1997 novel *Blu's Hanging*. Additionally, this dissertation devotes one chapter to the controversy about the cancellation of the Fiction Award awarded to Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* at the 1988 Association for Asian American Studies at Hawai'i. Through those well-known Asian American works of literature, drama, cinema, and event, I concentrate on the ways in which each of the works becomes appropriated for the production of Asian American representation in different politico-cultural contexts in American history. This will show how these works can claim themselves as not only essential to Asian America or the neoliberal U.S. but also counter-cultural to both of them at the same time.

This project aims at undermining the various kinds and levels of ideological discourse that neoliberal multiculturalism has pursued in the post-war U.S., as embedded in the selected textual, performative, and cinematic works of Asian America. Through this, my chapters show the extent to which Asian American identity takes shape in contradictory forms of both resistance and assimilation under the rule of

neoliberal multiculturalism. This refers to the way in which Asian Americans remain inconsistent subjects that want to identify with their established images as simultaneously denying them, for the course of becoming American ambivalently forces Asian Americans to both deny and desire their identity. This schizophrenic dimension of Asian American subjectivity bears upon the effective maneuver of the neoliberal U.S. which manages Asian America as both included and excluded. In this regard, my analysis is invested in exploring how the two Americas, Asian and white, interact with and engage in each other in the dialectical process of constructing their distinctive as well as inconsistent identities. This makes for a discordant incorporation of the Asian body into the body politic of the U.S.—as both model minority and yellow peril. Eventually, through traversing the double fantasies of becoming both Asian and American, my dissertation brings forth an apocalyptic vision of contemporary American society that exposes its inherent antagonisms that intersect the established norms and values of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Sexuality as well as race determines Asian American identity with respect to U.S. colonialism and multiculturalism. Since the Cold War, the U.S. had imagined an ideological frontier with Asia, projecting upon Asian bodies the phantasmic images of war, primitivism, unknowability, and colonial nostalgia. The racial stereotype of Oriental women as “Madame Butterfly” has consistently furnished the colonial imagination of Asian sexuality. In this framework, Chapter 1 examines the obscene fantasy of the colonial West about the East by juxtaposing Giacomo Puccini’s 1904 classic opera *Madame Butterfly* with David H. Hwang’s 1989 contemporary play *M. Butterfly*. Despite its anti-colonial quality, scholars have criticized *M. Butterfly* for

reproducing the racial stereotype of Asians in the postcolonial context of multiculturalism: that is, the colonial fantasy of Orientals as the “lotus blossom” to which *Madame Butterfly* originally gave birth. However, I suggest how such an imagined sexuality of Asians operates as subversive to the Western ideology of heterosexual normalcy. At stake is not simply how the imperial West projects its colonial desire onto the Oriental body as in *Madame Butterfly*; it is more important to understand how the figure of the Oriental desires an ideal Self that perversely indulges Western desire. Eventually, this chapter brings to light how traumatic it is when the colonial fantasy of the West comes true in reality through a suicidal death of the homosexual and Westernized Self in *M. Butterfly*.

The national presence of Asian bodies was reworked during the Cold War. Using Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1961 musical film *Flower Drum Song*, Chapter 2 explores the way in which the dancing Asian bodies in the musical flamboyantly display Asians in the U.S. as *really* American. This film bears witness to the change of U.S. ethnic policy in the wake of the Cold War, endorsing the repudiation of the prewar racial formation of Asians as absolute Other. In the film, the Asian cast seems to celebrate hybrid identity, multicultural assimilation, and the achievement of citizenship; nonetheless, there is another side to this musical performance. This chapter reads the repressed underside of these brilliant performances in light of the postcolonial trope of mimicry, subversion, and chaos. I posit that the modernized/Americanized dimension of the dancing Asian bodies indicates an endless process in which they never truly become identifiable as American. I investigate how the dancing performances of *Flower Drum Song* not only stand for an ideological ritual to get *reborn* as American in the U.S.

empire, but also reveal a particular gesture of exclusion that compromises the completion of the Empire.

The third chapter calls readers' attention to one of the hottest debates in the history of the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) since its inception in the late 1960s. In 1998 the AAAS awarded Yamanaka its Fiction Award for *Blu's Hanging*, only to have this award protested. The point at issue was the representation of Filipino American characters in the novel. This event divided the association into two groups: one criticizing the novel for the problematic portrayal of Filipinos in colonial Hawai'i, and the other defending it from the criticism in the name of aesthetic freedom. The so-called "crisis of representation," in Viet T. Nguyen's terms, in *Asian American Studies*, however, is not simply engaged with whether the author is racist or not; rather, it consists in how Asian Americans in Hawai'i are positioned in the complicate power dynamic between oppositional Hawaiian identity and cosmopolitan diasporic identity within the larger framework of the pan-ethnic identity of Asian America. The controversy around *Blu's Hanging* displays the eruption of Asian Americans' anxiety over refashioning the identity-bounded nation of Asian America to the transnational construction of pan-ethnic Asian America. Thus, it is indicative of the recent endeavor of Asian America to break from the extant binary of white and Asian in terms of race-oriented identity politics. Moreover, the anxiety also manifests this hysteria to move beyond the simplistic framework of resistance and accommodation, or good and bad, for it cannot properly challenge and cop with the contradictory politics at play in complex and multi-layered representations of Asian American race.

In Chapter 4, I analyze Lois-Ann Yamanaka's 1997 novel *Blu's Hanging*, a bildungsroman of the Ogata children leading a wretched life without "Mama" on a remote Hawaiian island. In the novel, the absence of "Mama" who sacrificed herself for her children, and whose ghost still watches over them, symbolizes a model of ideal Motherhood. I explain how the stereotype of Asian Americans as the "model minority" comes into contradiction: the spectral Mama as the model of ideal Motherhood passes into a colonial body of abjection, the scarred body of a leprous Japanese woman in colonial Hawai'i. Thus, I argue that the spectral Mama has an underside to her sublime image as ideal Motherhood—the ghost of a colonized, leprous Hawaiian who died at the expense of her *clean* children. Her sublime sacrifice consists of the antagonistic dimensions of Asian American identity as both colonial subject and ideal Motherhood. This sublimation occurs only by concealing the traumatic aspect of colonial Hawai'i which stigmatizes and wastes her Asian body. Namely, the spectral Mama has dual functions. On the one hand, she haunts her children as a disciplinary superego, telling them "what to do and not to do," embodying the devoted motherhood of the model minority. On the other hand, her spectrality implies the return of the repressed, a horrible intrusion of colonial memory into neoliberal multiculturalism. While being an emblem of ideal Motherhood, the spectral Mama is also a doomed obstacle that hinders her children from assimilating into the neoliberal society of the mainland. Consequently, she ends up negated by her own children, and her colonial ontology replaced by the neoliberal promise of American modernity.

Chapter 1

Colonial Fantasy as Performative:

Madame Butterfly and *M. Butterfly*

The representation of Asian Americans in American culture has been rife with the images of Asians as sexually promiscuous, culturally primitive, and morally corrupt. Hollywood and Broadway played a key role in spreading these stereotypes through theater, opera, and film in the twentieth century. Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* became a worldwide success in 1904 and the century ended with yet another stage version of this story, the hit *Miss Saigon*, opening in London in 1989 and running on Broadway from 1991 to 2001. Arthur Sullivan and W. S. Gilbert's popular comic opera *The Mikado* has also delighted American audiences for more than a century since 1885, reflecting an "1880s craze for all things Japanese"¹⁸ (Kenrick). Another immediate success worldwide upon its opening in London in 1896 is *The Geisha*, a musical comedy by Sidney Jones, spread the term *geisha* into many languages (Hashimoto 105). These works were not alone; Hollywood and Broadway have long produced works with an Oriental flavor for a Western audience. Yet out of these the "Butterfly" stories have a unique endurance. *Madame Butterfly* is still ranked number one among the top twenty most frequently performed operas in North America, and *Miss Saigon* the 10th longest-running Broadway musical in musical theatre history according to the website of *Opera America*.¹⁹ Both tell the tragic tale of a doomed romance involving an Asian woman abandoned by her American lover. In *Miss Saigon*,

¹⁸ *The Mikado* remains the most frequently performed Savoy Opera, a style of comic opera that developed in Victorian England in the late nineteenth century, and Gilbert and Sullivan were its original producers and most successful practitioners. Translated into numerous languages and one of the most frequently played musical theatre pieces in history, *The Mikado* reflected, as John Kenrick puts it in his website, a "1880s craze for all things Japanese."

¹⁹ See a website titled "Cornerstones: the 20 Most Performed Operas in North America" in *Opera America*.

the setting of the plot is relocated from Japan to Saigon during the 1970s Vietnam War, and *Madame Butterfly*'s coupling of American sailor Pinkerton and Japanese geisha Cio-Cio San is replaced by a romance between an American GI and a Vietnamese bar girl.

Culturally induced racial stereotypes as mentioned above helped establish American spectators'²⁰ lived relation to 'the real' in which they recognize Asians or Asian Americans in terms of Orientalism. The audience becomes accustomed to the images of the Orient that the system of Orientalist representation constructs as inevitable and natural—the imagined identity of Asian sexuality. Asian American identity constantly takes shape as a discursive entity of truth, which Slavoj Žižek translates as the “most effective form of a lie” (*TSOI* 30). In other words, the realm of culture interacts with the realm of the political economy to produce cultural commodities to fixate the image of Asian Americans as permanently exoticized, sexualized, and marginalized. This projection of the American imaginary onto the Asian body helped stabilize uneven relations of race; moreover, it set up a network of knowledge and power that produces Asians as the subject of difference in the U.S. in terms of race and sexuality, and out of such a discursive system comes the socio-political construct of exotic Asian race. *Madame Butterfly* is a good example how Asian identity in the U.S. becomes an abstract entity of commercial products that turns an imagined body of Orientals into a real one. This process of turning Asians or Asian Americans into a stable and determined form of identity can keep its functional consistency through its interaction with the spectator's fantasy over Asian sexuality—i.e., stereotypes that reproduce the cliché of Asians and Asian cultures as a form of truth. Their

²⁰ “American spectators” refer to cultural consumers who they believe came from mainstream American culture. As constituents of the conservative U.S. body politic, they tend to regard American culture as white-oriented and other minority cultures as ‘ethnic.’ They see Asian Americans—whether born in the states or immigrant from Asia— as permanent foreigners who hardly assimilate into mainstream culture. In this sense, the term assimilation has to do with the mainstream's nativist discourse that excludes people with Asian faces from the racial and cultural parameters of ‘real’ American identity.

constant popularity in the realm of pop culture shows the extent to which commercializing an image of Asia is marketable in the multicultural society of America.

Despite the deep-rootedness of Asian stereotypes, however, some disruptive events occurred in U.S. history which brought remarkable changes to the images of Asian Americans. One of them is the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which made a radical break with previous immigration policy and led to profound demographic changes in the U.S. This shift in the immigration policy of the U.S. in fact resulted from her pragmatic call for the Cold War politics against Soviet communism that criticized the segregationist U.S. as racist after WWII. Giving birth to the egalitarian sentiment at the height of the civil rights movement, the 1960s was a time of radical change when ideals of freedom, democracy and equality had seized the nation. On the one hand, the change of immigration policy in 1965 brought forth a demographic revolution that created racial, sexual, and cultural hybridizations among different ethnic groups. This, on the other hand, complicated the way white Americans identified themselves and others in terms of race, sexuality, and culture. Since the whole country was evolving and fragmented due to the massive influx of new immigrants from Asia, Asian Americans also had problems in identifying themselves as a monolithic whole while raising their ethnic consciousness against white America (Lawrence and Cheung 11).

Asian Americans' difficulties in identifying themselves as a whole ended in radical contradiction of Asian stereotypes, such as the "model minority" vs. the "yellow peril." David Palumbo-Liu suggests the multi-layered formation of Asian America hybrid subjectivity after the 1960s that remains no longer in the monolithic framework of Asian America in racial terms created the shifting and conflicting set of images of Asians. During the Cold War, the U.S. had a politico-economic necessity to incorporate Asia and Asians into the ideological parameter of American modernity to win against communist expansionism. At the same time, it resulted in introjecting the deep-seated stereotype of Asians into the U.S. imaginary (Palumbo-Liu 18-21).

In the context of Cold War politics, the U.S. accepted Asians as ‘modernized’ subjects in order to represent herself as the defender of the Free World while protecting democratic values. Yet this relationship based on equal terms was at odds with the stereotypes of Asians as perpetual aliens. This representational inconsistency of the national identity in the post-war era began to transfigure Asian Americans as the ambivalent neighbor of love and hate.

The ambivalent images of Asian Americans—namely, as either too exotic or too friendly to be a trusted neighbor—remain today indefinite of their identity. Even this has become a performative role to which Asian Americans themselves feel both extraneous and intrinsic simultaneously. Viet Nguyen calls it a “crisis of representation” in terms of accommodation and resistance. In fact, Asian American literary studies has witnessed, since its inception in the 1960s, some controversial debates over the legitimacy of Asian American representation. Among the well-known cases is the one between Frank Chin and Maxine H. Kingston in the 1970s, which concerned issues about cultural authenticity and ethnic representativeness.²¹ David H. Hwang rekindled the debate when his *M. Butterfly* premiered on Broadway in 1988. This play has been highly acclaimed by critics so as to earn Hwang a Tony award, and the play itself was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Hwang wrote this play to critique the history of the Butterfly story as a cultural landmark situated between high art and a legacy of problematic racial and gender stereotypes. But this play has witnessed itself placed within the debate regarding whether it deconstructs sexism, Orientalism, and imperialism or restages the Orientalist stereotypes it purports to dismantle (S. Wong 51), which I will further address below. Interestingly, the ambivalence and inconsistency witnessed in the critical reception of Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* is found in irony in his interview celebrating the 20th anniversary of the play: “I

²¹ Especially, this debate created a great sensation since Frank Chin was an editor of the first Asian American anthology *Aiiieeeee!* and Maxine H. Kingston was the author of one of the most influential Asian American novels, *The Woman Warrior*. To see more of this debate, see the introduction chapter and Chapter 3 on “Traumatic Diversities” of this dissertation.

always saw Edward Said's *Orientalism* as an inspiration for this show and, of course, Said was writing about Orientalism in the Middle East as opposed to East Asia" (Hoffman).

No matter how Asian Americans are assimilated to or resisted from mainstream culture, the reductive concept of ethnic difference remains intrinsic to their identity and turns it into a kind of performative reiterative role. This might sound more convincing considering that the only way for Asian performers to represent themselves in American culture is to act as a "caricature of themselves." For example, Ming-Na Wen, the Asian actor who played the voice of Disney's *Mulan* began her performing career "to get out of my own skin and be somebody else." In an American society that nourishes Asians with "the steady diet of demeaning caricatures with embarrassment and shame," the only choice for them to represent themselves is ironically to perform their stereotyped roles and celebrate their "Asianness." B. D. Wong who played Song Liling in Hwang's *M. Butterfly* states, "I consciously wished I wasn't Asian. Later I told myself that I would be a different kind of Asian. It wasn't until I played an Asian in *M. Butterfly* that I could celebrate my Asianness" (Zia 115). That is to say, no matter what those Asian American performers play is seen by the spectator reductively as a masquerading of *the* conceptual Asian with an unidentifiable kernel of Asian identity. Suffice it to say that scholars criticized Wong's portrayal of Song in the drama as *caricaturing* Asian stereotypes in the drama: "the Song character as "the good Chinese man...is the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass" (*TBA* xiii).

Against this backdrop, this chapter explores the extent to which the performative role of *Madame Butterfly* in both Puccini's opera and Hwang's play passes into iconic stereotype. Stereotype as an articulation of something familiar yet different both fixates and destabilizes identity at the same time.²² This is a reason that racial stereotype contained in the fantasy of Asian Americans leaves room for the spectator to project their fetishistic imaginations. In this

²² With regard to this, see Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture* on pp. 130-31.

vein, Susan Koshy discusses the so-called evolution of the Madame Butterfly narrative. Inspired by the 1887 French travelogue, *Madame Chrysanthemum*, American novelist John Luther Long published the white-Asian interracial romance in 1898 and in 1904, Puccini repeatedly revised and adopted the story as we see it in the opera house today. The narrative is still so influential in American culture as to compel Hollywood to have produced its adaptations, such as *The World of Suzie Wong* and *Miss Saigon*.²³ The racial as well as gender stereotype of Oriental women as signified in the term “Madame Butterfly” has consistently furnished American imaginations of Asian sexuality as a gendered trope of sexual fantasy. The imperishable narrative of Butterfly even evolved into Hwang’s 1989 “deconstructionist Madame Butterfly” (*M. B 95*). Hwang reinterprets the original to such an extent that the “precarious fixity” of racial fantasy becomes such a fetishistic role that it displaces the established platform of racial and gender identifications. The masquerading performance dictated by Orientalist fantasy repudiates the race-bounded idea of American identity politics by reversing who is supposed to be behind the mask.

This chapter compares Puccini’s classic opera with Hwang’s drama, yet its more urgent objective is to theorize the iconic representation of Madame Butterfly as a performative role that determines the ontology of the performing subject. More specifically, it traverses the way in which Madame Butterfly that comes into being as a signifier of Oriental beauty in the colonial context of Puccini’s opera transforms into a traumatic figure of monstrosity Hwang engages in his postcolonial interpretation of the original. Despite its unabated popularity, the opera has been notorious for disseminating ‘Orientalized’ images of Asians in American culture as mysterious, submissive, and hypersexual. It reiterates a typical colonialist narrative of ‘East meets West’ which Ilka Saal compares to a *veni-vidi-vici* plot: “the strong Caucasian man meets,

²³ Susan Koshy explains how popular and ‘evolving’ the narrative of Madame Butterfly has been by being re-written, dramatized, and visualized via multiple medium in Western popular culture in her *Sexual Naturalization* on pp. 29-30.

sees, and subdues the fragile, gentle Asian woman” (629). Given that, my interest goes further into investigating in detail how a Japanese geisha transforms into the full-blown Madame Butterfly in the colonial context; moreover, I takes the classic opera as a whole as a performative ritual that materializes the colonial fantasy of the Orient by staging both self-killing of her physical body and rebirth of her iconic representation. In *Madame Butterfly*, the geisha commits suicide and leaves her name as an immortal signifier of feminine ideals in the heterosexual and colonial culture of the West that the American sailor Pinkerton stands for. I propose that this imaginary figuration of Oriental race and sexuality reveals his narcissistic desire to identify with her in terms of the expansionist projection of American modernity into the Orient.²⁴

Through both masquerading and unmasking performances, Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* reveals that the race and gender-specific fantasy of Butterfly consists in the internalization and repression of the Oriental Other within the ideological system of Western modernity. Despite its anti-colonial orientation, scholars have criticized the contemporary play for reproducing the established stereotypes of Asians as the colonial binary of master and slave (Saal 629). In his postcolonial response to Puccini’s opera, Hwang obviously maintains the colonial fantasy of Orientals in his play, that is, a submissive image of the Asian female as the “lotus blossom” to which Puccini’s opera gave birth. James Moy argues that Hwang’s play inadequately “displaces the very Orientalist stereotypes it seeks to dismantle,” reproduces Asian characters as “laughable and grossly disfigured,” and contributes to the “new order of stereotypical representations created

²⁴ In “The Economy of Manichean Allegory,” Abdul JanMohamed suggests that, in the colonial text, the West’s imaginary creation of the East as the colonial subject of feminine ideal has to do with the former’s narcissistic identification with the latter as his mirrored image. He calls such a text the “imaginary text” in which the Western subject projects the Eastern other with his either negative or imaginary images of his own self.

by Asian Americans” (Moy 55).²⁵ Despite all this, I argue that Asian sexuality operates as both essential and subversive to the representational system of Western racial and sexual discourse. I do not naively suggest that Asian stereotypes of being submissive and mysterious are simply wrong and unethical; rather, my focus is on the extent to which the ideological tropes of Western modernity in terms of race and sexuality radically turns into an articulation of the fetishistic desire for both homosexual and trans-racial Other.

To put it another way, *M. Butterfly* is not simply a critique of the way in which the imperialist West projects colonial desire onto the Oriental body to complete the ideological consistency of Western modernity as witnessed in *Madame Butterfly*. More imperative is a understanding of, first, how the interjection of Asian foreignness into Western subjectivity develops into queer performance; secondly, how the queer disrupts the representational system of Western modernity based on the white heterosexual family ideology; and finally, how it diversifies the prevailing paradigm of subject formation by *disidentifying* its ideological subjection.

While Puccini’s Pinkerton claims a right to possession of the Japanese geisha as his colonial property, Hwang pushes around the West’s fetishistic infatuation for the East to the extent that his drama disclose obscene and schizophrenic symptoms in the modern civilization of the West. Through the transvestite Song cross-dressing as the geisha in *M. Butterfly*, Hwang discloses a systemic gap as a site of ideological failure in the hegemonic establishment of Western modernity. This anti-colonial project brings about displacement of the colonial desire of American expansionism into a narcissistic obsession of a Western man which results in his self-destruction. In critical response to colonial discourse, this chapter will show how the self-killing is attributed to a failure of preserving the ontological consistency of Western subjectivity that

²⁵ For a counterargument of James Moy’s criticism on *M. Butterfly*, see Quentin Lee’s “Between the Oriental and the Transvestite,” *Found Object* (Fall 1993): 45-59. He asserts that the field of Asian American representation be more flexible to accommodate articulations of gay Asian American desire.

has recourse to the gender tropes of masculinity and heterosexuality vis-à-vis the hypersexual and exotic Orient.

The Doomed Genesis of Madame Butterfly

Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* premiered in 1904 during the culmination of the European imperial powers' competition for colonizing the East. Following typical colonial narratives based on the Manichean binary of colonial subjects—master vs. slave (Memmi 83), this classic opera portrays the East as the negative inversion of the West. The geisha Cio-Cio San is portrayed as the incarnation of Eastern beauty. It is true that Hwang describes her as “a feminine ideal, beautiful and brave” (*M.B* 5). Yet it does not break the typical rule that, as he puts it, “the West thinks of itself as masculine—big guns, big industry, big money—so the East is feminine—weak, delicate, poor” (“Afterwords” 83). She precisely corresponds to what Edward Said defines as the trope of Orientalism—“metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise” (*Orientalism* 222). This opera constructs the life-substance of the Japanese concubine as both submissive and mysterious to the American sailor Pinkerton. She is not only his fetishistic object of sexual desire but also his narcissistic self-other to identify with as his colonial fantasy realized at its purest. This becomes obvious insofar as her presence as an Oriental of both racial and sexual difference becomes meaningful in a way to uphold the colonial discourse of “White Man's Burden,” legitimizing Pinkerton's sexual freedom and colonial dominance. Toward the end of the opera, the exotic presence of the geisha, an unassimilable racial/sexual Other, is removed from the colonial panoramic view of the Western family ideology which holds miscegenation of the racial purity of the imperial West as taboo.²⁶ Cio-Cio San commits

²⁶ In national politics of women's sexuality, such an antifeminist stance is common in defense of the national collectivity of patriarchal society. As Benedict Anderson takes nationalism as sacrificial fraternal devotion *Imagined Communities*, nationalism has been gendered as masculine (7). In a similar vein, Rachel Lee remarks that national unity poses

suicide after meeting Pinkerton's lawful American wife Kate, who makes a promise to take care of her love child, Sorrow. The baby Sorrow finally gets renamed Joy while holding an American flag in his hands—a baby “born with azure eyes” and “sent from Heaven” (*MB* 2.2). The child born out of wedlock²⁷ is considered a product of Western imperialism that symbolizes the establishment of colonial civilization in the East. His hybrid identity thus stands for the fateful submission of the primitive Oriental to the universality of the modern West. In this sense, the geisha's suicidal death is foreseen from the beginning, for she has the doomed destiny of being a racial/sexual Other whose inassimilable presence cannot be properly symbolized in the ideological universality of Western modernity. In the same vein, Kate is comparable to an incarnation of the Western family ideology that interdicts both miscegenation and polygamy, so that her performative subjectivity refers to the prohibitive colonial law of Western modernity which incriminates Cio-Cio San and puts her to death. Her racial and sexual otherness should be sacrificed to secure a position for the baby in the U.S., an emblem of the fantastic union of East and West. Thus the dying Cio-Cio San says to his baby: “'Tis for you, my love, for you I'm dying... Never to feel the torment when you are older, That your mother forsook you!” Her sacrifice as such eventually helps constitute colonial discourse, supporting the triumphant manifestation of Western modernity that legitimizes American expansion toward Asia.

sexualized women as the cause of brotherly separation that threatens the loss of male companionship in *The Americas of Asian American Literature* (26). To secure their position as legitimate rulers and uphold imperialist masculinity, European imperialist powers used to command colonial policies to emphasize difference towards the colonized; however, interracial sexuality in the colonial terrain always remained the site of regulation and contestation as witnessed in institutionalized concubinage and prostitution in colonial India. For more, see Kenneth Ballhatchet's *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905*, and Ann Laura Stoler's “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia.”

²⁷ Pinkerton's marriage to Cio-Cio San is done illegitimate, just like the way he purchased a 999-years-old Japanese house in Nagasaki to cancel the contract every month. This symbolizes his ‘ownership’ of both Cio-Cio San and house is established not on permanent settlement but on transient colonization.

From a holistic point of view, Cio-Cio San's life and death work as a mediator that disappears to give birth to the child and thus to consummate the legitimate universality of Western modernity. The geisha's self-destruction, in that regard, functions as an indispensable necessity in this theatrical narrative, eliminating her antagonistic kernel of Oriental subjectivity which is incompatible with the totalitarian temptation of Western modernity. I suggest that her death can be understood in terms of what I call colonial performativity, for the performance of her suicidal death can only be properly symbolized as tragic and sublime in the colonialist narrative of the West. That is to say, her death performance becomes meaningful only as what is dictated by the performativity of the narrative itself. Judith Butler gives a definition of performativity as different from that of performance: performativity stands for the reiteration of norms that precede, constrain, and exceed the performer, constituting his/her subjectivity as performative according to the norms. Performance, on the contrary, focuses on the performer's will and agency as performing subject.²⁸ Given these different definitions, Butler argues that performativity is equivalent to what constitutes individuals' subjectivity that is subject to what they perform within the historical context of such performance. In short, the so-called performative not only dictates but also interlocks with individual subjects' performance. Cio-Cio San's self-destruction, I argue, results from "colonial performativity" which upholds the opera's colonialist narrative and maintains the ideological unity of Western modernity. In other words, the narrative of *Madame Butterfly* unfolds in a way to remove what eventually prevents the West's colonial discourse from being complete as a whole: Cio-Cio San is considered an antagonistic presence to Western civilization which upholds colonial discourse of Western men's strong masculinity and heterosexual family ideology in the colonial terrain. The *totalitarian* universe of Western modernity can accomplish its ideological closure only via the

²⁸ See Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001): 57.

elimination of the geisha's exotic presence which poses a threat to the colonial discourse, and it ultimately leads to a perpetual incarnation of colonial fantasy, Madame Butterfly. To prove this last statement, it is imperative to elaborate on how the geisha's suicide finally brings about the ideological creation of the signifier Madame Butterfly. As mentioned earlier, the geisha's life—love of Pinkerton and death for it—works as a vanishing mediator justifying the colonial modernity of the West, yet, more important, it exposes how colonial performativity affects the narrative. What I mean by colonial performativity is the ideological framework of colonial imperialism in which the narrative unfolds to render inevitable and justified the West's colonial dominance over the East and to create Madame Butterfly as a perpetual incarnation of colonial fantasy at the end. So what is imperative to the maintenance of colonial discourse in the narrative is to differentiate Cio-Cio San as the Japanese geisha (inassimilable Other) from that as the universal signifier of colonial desire. The question is how the colonial performativity makes possible the ontological transformation of the geisha into Madame Butterfly.

Madame Butterfly as a Universal

Madame Butterfly is Cio-Cio San's performative role fantasized within the colonial context in which Western modernity takes over the pre-modern East. Her suicidal death is due to her failure to unite with Pinkerton, her ideal lover as well as colonizer. While being with him, she is enraptured with being full of happiness: "now, beloved, you[Pinkerton] are the world. Ah! Night of rapture." She feels united not only with her lover but also with the world: "The night doth enfold us...See the world lies sleeping...How kindly are the heavens" (*MB* 1.1). Cio-Cio San's union with Pinkerton indicates individuals' ontological state in totality with their desire fully satisfied, which is translated as the so-called ideal ego, or the *imago*, in psychoanalytic terms. This notion refers to an a priori condition of the subject whose desire has not been generated yet, a primordial state of human consciousness with no sense of desire to gratify. In

this primitive state, there is no ontological gap between the subject (private self) and its identity (public self). Yet this imaginary condition of the subject remains unfulfilled in reality, for desire originates from the irreducible gap between the ideal ego and its social substitute called the ego-ideal.

In *Écrits*, Jacques Lacan explains that the former is an a priori ego prior to the recognition of the difference between the self and other, so that Lacan terms this stage of psychic development “the Imaginary.” This primitive stage of the ego implies a kind of psychic totality, so totalitarian an ego that the primordial self negates every being outside of it. This imaginary condition of pre-subjectivity develops into the so-called Symbolic order. The Symbolic constitutes a good part of what we usually perceive as the reality. It is the impersonal framework of society in which we take our place as part of a community of fellow human beings. This is why the Symbolic is concerned with the term symbolic Law because its purview includes everything from language to the law, taking in all the social structures within to sustain itself as a hegemonic system of reality. In the Symbolic, the ego has to give up on its imaginary, pre-linguistic stage of transcendental subjectivity and finally transforms into the ideological subject, in Louis Althusser’s terms, with its public identity governed by the symbolic Law.

People are inscribed in the Symbolic upon becoming born into it because they are given a name, belong to a family, a socio-economic group, a gender, a race, a nation and so on. This is how an individual becomes an ideological subject, being “interpellated” in Althusserian terms according to the symbolic Law. This transitional stage also refers to what Lacan terms “the mirror stage,” a threshold in-between which the ontological division between subject-self and object-other finally emerges. In the course of the mirror stage, the self comes to recognize the other as a kind of mirrored object of its own imaginary ideal ego that has been lost forever. In Lacan’s theory, human desire comes from the epistemological gap between the self and the other as the mirrored object of the former, and our way of satisfying the desire is only to find a

substitute for the lost ideal ego: that is, the so-called ego-ideal. Namely, the very moment of the self's recognition of itself as a mirrored object indicates the permanent loss of its ideal ego, and the resulting gap between the ideal ego and the ego-ideal is never closed, and generally, this process informs the nature of human desire as never fully fulfilled. The Lacanian subject formation shows the way in which the subject is born into the Symbolic as one that lacks his or her ideal ego, which creates a fundamental and primordial desire to substitute the lack with an ego-ideal, namely, an object of desire. The ideal ego in the Imaginary turns into the subject of lack or desire, which is metaphorically *castrated* in a Freudian sense, and thus desires to restore its forever-lost totality by finding its ego-ideal in the Symbolic. That is, the ego-ideal becomes a kind of metaphorical substitute for the ideal ego, and human desire originates from the subject's ceaseless effort to regain the ideal ego.

To apply this psychoanalytic reading to my analysis of *Madame Butterfly*, we have to understand that human desire is narcissistic in nature and not fully satisfied at all. With that in mind, we can see the cause of Cio-Cio San's death drive. Her suicide is due to her failure to be united with Pinkerton who becomes, in the colonialist narrative, an ideal other that she fetishizes as an ego-ideal, a substitutive signifier of her ideal ego. This is because her Oriental subjectivity cannot find itself assimilated into—or properly symbolized in—the hegemonic order of Western modernity. The only choice left for her is to give up on her ego-ideal, Pinkerton, along with her desire to live on and kill her subject-self, which has not been properly symbolized in the colonialist narrative that constitutes and praises Western modernity. She is denied her normative role as proper life in the colonial universe.

The question is: could there be any alternative way for the Oriental subject of the geisha to be represented properly in the colonial order of the Symbolic and not to be eliminated? She might be able to survive in the colonialist narrative if her racial and gender Otherness is considered not threatening or obscene but pleasurable and beautiful. To put it another way, Cio-Cio San plays a

performative role with double identities: the geisha who kills herself on the stage and Madame Butterfly who survives beyond the stage, a space for the colonist performativity of eliminating the exotic Other. Her physical death engenders a pure form of ideological substance, an abstract form of colonial fantasy that is consistent with the colonial discourse of Western modernity. Just like the way formalist abstraction is defined, the signifier Madame Butterfly ends up without material or indexical representation, ridding itself of the represented object when the material medium, Cio-Cio San the geisha, turns into its own purest signification via self-destruction.²⁹ The most fetishistic object of colonial fantasy known as Madame Butterfly finally comes to a realization only insofar as its physical referent becomes fully abstract via total elimination.

Cio-Cio San laments over her failure of being with Pinkerton: “Through closèd gate he enter’d. Life and Love enter’d with him; then he went and nought was left to us. Nothing, nothing, nothing but death.” When he leaves her, she has *nothing* as long as her ontological materiality is solely taken up by her performative role as Madame Butterfly: she only has a “life with dishonour”—a life of the Japanese concubine having served the American soldier. While dying, she exclaims to her child, “Though you ne’er must know it. ’Tis for you, my love, for you I’m dying, Poor Butterfly. That you may go away beyond the ocean. Never to feel the torment when you are older. That your mother forsook you!” Cio-Cio San holds herself responsible and guilty for leaving her baby and feels sorry for herself by objectifying herself as “Poor Butterfly,” the geisha as the Other behind the mask of Madame Butterfly. Cio-Cio San’s identity as a geisha, not as Madame Butterfly, is what must be removed from the colonialist narrative and abandoned by Pinkerton. In such a narrative that drives her out of its colonial purview, self-

²⁹ For more specific definitions of representations, see W. J. T. Mitchell, “Representation,” *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and McLaughlin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) on p. 16.

destruction becomes the only choice she can make on her own will and agency³⁰: that is, the only way she can fulfill her desire once and for all to get away with dishonor, i.e., to negate her being a concubine at the most radical level. In sum, her will for death stands for an absolute negation of her symbolic materiality to such an extent that she excludes every bit of her life-substance as an Oriental concubine whose ontology the colonial universe perversely constitutes as antithetical to Madame Butterfly—a purely formal signifier of colonial beauty. In the following pages, we will see more of how Cio-Cio San's self-killing is designed for the completion of the colonialist plot of *Madame Butterfly* to perpetuate and universalize the symbolic tropes of Orientalism.

Madame Butterfly the Sublime

Cio-Cio San's self-killing as an act of negating herself does not necessarily mean the death of Madame Butterfly. Since her suicide on the stage, the iconic figure of Butterfly as feminine beauty has come alive appealing to audiences around the world. Despite its first premiere more than a century ago, *Madame Butterfly* is still one of the most frequently performed operas in North America. It is likely that the opera's unceasing popularity originates in Cio-Cio San's immortality as Madame Butterfly. The theatrical fantasy of the iconic figure on the stage was prevailing in colonial times and continues even today. In this regard, Cio-Cio San's death is neither futile nor nihilistic insofar as it renders her immortal by eliminating the ontological gap between the Japanese concubine and Madame Butterfly. Her self-killing turns her into a universal object of colonial fantasy which has been haunting Western modernity ever since. As an act of absolute self-negation of the Symbolic, Cio-Cio San performs her self-destruction via seppuku with her father's dagger, the one that her father also used to kill himself in the same

³⁰ In relation to the difference between performativity and performance, please see the footnote 17.

way. Prior to her self-execution, she reads the symbolic inscription on the weapon: “Death with honour is better than life with dishonour.” What this engraving informs is that her identity as a geisha whose body and soul the white devil Pinkerton disgraced symbolizes “dishonour,” and the dagger supplements her body lacking the honor with the inscription on it through the execution of hara-kiri. In other words, her seppuku signifies a ceremonial ritual of ripping open her forsaken body which lacks honor via the dagger upon which honor is inscribed. At the same time, it radically unites the two, her body and the dagger. This is the most critical moment in the opera which not only dramatizes the death of the geisha but also represents the true birth of Madame Butterfly through the radical union of ontological opposites: the monstrous Thing combined with the spiritual ‘honor’ penetrates Cio-Cio San’s Oriental body which lacks honor. The monstrous dagger not only violently intrudes the geisha’s body, which lacks the spirit of “honour” but also supplements her with itself. That is to say, her ritualistic performance of seppuku represents not so much self-negation as ontological transformation in which the particular being of the geisha turns into the universal symbol of colonial fantasy with no lack of honor, with no ontological gap. The tripartite elements, her corporal body (as inherent from the Imaginary: the primordial), the spirit (as constituted in the Symbolic: ideological subjectivity), and the monstrous Thing (as the ontological gap between the two: the Real), all condense into her dead body at the final scene of the opera. This results in the abstract formation of Madame Butterfly as immortal in the mind of the Western spectator. In the opera, before committing suicide, she talks to her baby as follows: “[exaltedly] My son, sent to me from Heaven / Straight from the throne of glory / Take one last and careful look / At your poor mother’s face! / That its memory may linger / One last look!” The disgraced body of the geisha perishes with the monstrous dagger, yet the spirit of honor on the dagger which penetrates the body completes her ontological being as a purely abstract signifier of both the eternal and immaculate.

In the wake of Cio-Cio San's ritualistic seppuku, the iconic figure of Madame Butterfly eventually is resurrected from her dead body. The opera ends with Pinkerton's repeated outcries "Butterfly, Butterfly, Butterfly!" and its sound resonates throughout the opera house, engraving on the mind of the audience the tragic but sublime image of her in a kimono. Remarkably, as the hegemonic establishment of Western modernity relies on its colonial legacy, the long-admired iconic beauty does have recourse to its opposite Real—the dead body of an Oriental concubine with a horrible stabbing wound. The formalistic representation of Madame Butterfly fundamentally relies on its representational means, namely, the Real which still haunts the Symbolic Order. On a theoretical level, the iconic rebirth of the geisha into the abstract figure of Madame Butterfly can be better understood in psychoanalytic terms. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek suggests that the ideological creation of a sublime object is built on the radical conjunction of ontological opposites that works as a short circuit whereby "the uncontrollable externality of the body passes immediately into something bound to pure interiority of thought" (223). With regard to the ritual practice of self-killing, the dagger Cio-Cio San used in seppuku is a good example of the short circuit. The geisha's body stands for a failed signifier in the hegemonic order of Western modernity, that is, a pure object of *nothing*, while the body with the dagger of the spirit "honour" stuck inside comes to give rise to a new meaning for the dead geisha. This transformative process takes place to such an extent that the monstrous Thing with the spirit becomes united with the dead body of self-negation. The geisha's seppuku with the spiritual Thing transforms the material/particular body into the sublime/aesthetic figure of the indestructible and immutable body which persists beyond the corruption of the physical.

In this transformative process of aesthetic abstraction, the monstrous Thing combined with the word "honor" not only penetrated Cio-Cio San's body, which lost face but also stuffed honor back into the body. The dagger fills out the ontological void of the negated body that was

denied a proper subject position in the symbolic universe of Western modernity and turns it into the fantastic signifier of Madame Butterfly. This theoretical approach to the transformation of Cio-Cio San's monstrous dead body into the sublime Madame Butterfly is better understood in terms of the Lacanian notion of "the phallus." This refers to the Master-Signifier of the sublime object to such an extent that "the lowest, most vulgar function of urination passes into the most sublime function of procreation" (*TSOI* 223). This can be rephrased in a Žižekian mode in the following way: the immaterial corporality of the negated (lowest and most vulgar) body of the failed subject becomes immortal through the combination of both monstrous body and spiritual "honour." Once having been an ideological leftover of such combination which escapes the circle of subjection in the Symbolic, the deserted body of the geisha eventually passes into the sublime object of Butterfly, the iconic signifier of colonial beauty and submission. The logic of sublimation, therefore, has recourse to the immediate conjunction of seemingly incompatible dimensions of a thing, such as a penis for both procreation and urination, and Madame Butterfly as both the dead body of the geisha with a horrible wound and object-cause of colonial fantasy. In other words, the sublime refers to the radical embodiment of a pure negativity and emptiness in the guise of the positive corporality of the negated.

The performative transformation of the geisha into Madame Butterfly is made possible by concealing her traumatic ontological dimension as abandoned Oriental concubine. The iconic figure of Madame Butterfly is thus what represses the disturbing protuberance of the Real in the hegemonic order of Western modernity and successfully integrates the uncontrollable truth into the consistent universal of the Symbolic. Such an ideological effect of sublimation or aesthetic abstraction, however, cannot but expose its symptom which Žižek defines as "a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus" (*TSOI* 21). This subversive symptom is manifest in the problematic character of Rene Gallimard in Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. Puccini's opera bears witness to the ideological embodiment of Butterfly

the sublime as resurrected from the dead body of the Oriental geisha. It has showed us how the geisha transforms into the immortal signifier of Orientalism via her deathly sacrifice for her American lover. On the contrary, Hwang's deconstructionist drama demonstrates how the universal signifier of colonial fantasy ends up as a pathological symptom of ideological paradox that subverts the very universal itself.

An Alternative Reading of the Phallic Thing

Hwang's *M. Butterfly* distorts and mocks the East and the West power relationship that Puccini's opera registers through the gendered tropes of race in the colonial context. The play has the stage set up as a closed society of the totalitarian China ruled by the strict communist regime where a strong sense of Sino-nationalism against Western influence is demanded from the people. It contextualizes the stage in a contemporary world where the West is still considered masculine and the East feminine, and the latter tries to fight back the inherent colonial legacy. Film critic Richard Fung's essay in 1991 titled "Looking for My Penis" shows how modern Asian American manhood is still "exoticized, feminized, and made invisible" (107).³¹ In this regard, the stage displays a kind of limbo space where not only do anti-cultural imperialism and anti-Orientalism cross each other, but the ideological normalcy against homosexuality and miscegenation is still dominant. Against this backdrop, the French diplomat Gallimard falls in love with the transvestite Chinese diva Song who masquerades as Madame Butterfly. The Western "foreign devil" falsely recognizes him as woman and keeps his homosexual relationship with the Chinese spy in Oriental drag for twenty years. When indicted for espionage activities, Gallimard denies in court the real identity of Song as male. In the face of Song's being naked, however, Gallimard "plunges the knife into his body" while wearing a

³¹ Quoted in Anne A. Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001): 107.

Butterfly kimono in jail. Different from the ending of Puccini's opera, Song in this play shouts "Butterfly," but in a questioning tone: "Butterfly? Butterfly?"

I read Song's reiteration of "Butterfly?" as a symptom that resists the confirmation of the iconic abstraction of Madame Butterfly as the colonial emblem of feminine sexuality. Song's exclamation followed by a question mark implies that an ideological interpellation toward Song winds up incomplete as well as impossible. This failed signifier of ontological abstraction results from calling Song the iconic figure of colonial fantasy and turns on Gallimard being his own object of fantasy, an absurd means of representing Butterfly in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. Namely, Gallimard identifies himself with the fetishistic object of his own fantasy. In such a way, Hwang's postcolonial project twists and mocks the colonial fantasy as he mentions via Song's voice in *M. Butterfly*—i.e., "the submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man" (17). In a similar vein, David Eng observes in his *Racial Castration* that *M. Butterfly* comments on the symbolic order of hegemonic ideology that prohibits homosexuality and downplays ethnic identities of people of color in favor of white heterosexuality. He continues, "Unable to occupy the position of the domineering European imperialist following Song's morphological unveiling, Gallimard is so invested in heterosexuality and whiteness that he ultimately elects to occupy the position of the 'other'" (142-3). The perverted inversion of Gallimard's sexual and racial position into Song's one portrays white heterosexual masculinity as not so much essential as constituted by, as he puts it, "fetishistic application" (143). From his viewpoint, Gallimard's suicide is due to his 'impotence' of being unable to live up to his given racial and sexual identity which underpins his colonial authority.

Concerning the transformative sexual and racial identity of Gallimard who ends up dead in Butterfly's kimono and wig, Eng makes an interesting point. He juxtaposes with the so-called phallus his passing into his own object of fantasy. Citing Mark Chiang, he suggests that Gallimard's fetishistic application to heterosexual masculinity necessarily demands his

masculine identity with the phallus, namely, his having the phallus. If the phallus refers to the symbolic discourse of strong masculinity as metaphorically implied in the anatomical organ of the penis, Eng's idea sounds fair. In this case, both phallus and penis are considered a fetishistic object and property indispensable for possibly *having* masculinity. He goes further to say Gallimard's transformation into a white-masked homosexual Oriental allows him not to have it but to "be the phallus" (164). Namely, his metamorphosis as a homosexual transvestite indicates his libidinal investment in colonial fantasy which runs amuck identifying himself with the colonial emblem of feminine sexuality, which drives him not so much to *have* as to *be* the penis. Gallimard's ontological alteration into being the phallus from having it, Eng contends, manifests his homosexual relationship with the French ambassador Toulon, and witnesses their representational crisis of heterosexual subjectivity, the hegemonic norm of the West. This collapse of the having/being distinction renders exposed the hidden ideology of heterosexual normativity, which actually originates from homosexual impulses. According to Eng, therefore, the ideological normalization of heterosexual whiteness perversely masks the white male's fetishistic desire for the phallus qua the indexical signifier of homosexuality: not only femininity but masculinity also becomes a highly fetishized object.

Problematic in Eng's analysis, however, is that the theoretical concept of the phallus is reduced to the "delegated symbol of male privilege and abuse," translating it simply as a metaphoric object of symbolic masculinity, namely, a penis (RC 165). Eng's conflation of phallus and penis does not make strict use of the Lacanian notion of the phallus which his analysis is indebted to. For Lacan, the phallus stands for the Master-Signifier, designating the ultimate source of human desire as the ontological gap of the subject. It does not materialize masculine power that women desire to possess and men must have, nor does it render visible the secret desire of Western men

for homosexuality under the guise of normalizing the heterosexual.³² Rather, the phallus refers to the symbolic form of one's excessive enjoyment which cannot be properly recognized and determined in the hegemonic discourse of ideological normativity. It constitutes the ontological gap of the subject as the primordial locus of libidinal desire. In other words, the phallus functions as not only the signifier of symbolic castration and ontological void but also the signifier that forbids the subject to gain access to its own gap in the Symbolic (*TPF* 15). In this sense, the phallus might explain why men must have the penis: it refers to a vulgar substitute for the phallus they lack in order to *enjoy* masculine power and abuse over women. This is how patriarchal ideology operates by conflating both phallus and penis, justifying men's masculinity by their having the masculine sexual organ.

Gallimard's passing into the phallus results from the way in which he becomes identified with what he has fetishized. This exposes the monstrous dimension of the Real as denied symbolization and repressed in white heterosexual normativity. It is the queer Butterfly with a penis which turns on the true presence of the phallus—the ontological gap of Gallimard's normalized subjectivity that lacks its positive symbolic meaning. As a result, Gallimard as a white homosexual transvestite performs his self-killing, for his *monstrous* presence as such can survive neither in a communist China nor in a heterosexual West. Eventually, this play makes for an inverse transubstantiation of the sublime Butterfly into the dead body of a white homosexual: Gallimard's dead body in Butterfly's wig and gown is nothing but a failed signifier of the sublime. From now on, we will see how his self-destruction takes place to an extent that it

³² David Eng's understanding of the phallus is based on the reductive difference of sexual organs between male and female. In this framework, having the phallus is not only masculine but also male, and one without having it becomes a female whose primordial object-cause is the phallus, namely, the penis. This idea is found not only incorrect but also controversial among many feminist critics who attack Lacanian psychoanalysis as anti-feminist. Regarding Eng's theoretical application on the phallus, see the footnote 46 which quotes Lacan's *Écrits* on p. 253 in *Racial Castration*. For more on the phallus, also see Muller and Richardson's *Lacan and Language* on pp. 337-38.

is not so much his becoming the phallus qua the penis as his becoming the phallus qua the Real. His ontological gap, consequently, works as queer to the performative context of the West that has constituted and regulated his racial and gender identity.

M(ale) Butterfly as Symptom

The deconstructive play of *M. Butterfly* shows an inverse torsion of the colonial binaries of sexuality. Simply put, the perverted sexuality of the West becomes hysterical and the hysterical one of the East becomes perverted.³³ As Slavoj Žižek posits in *The Ticklish Subject*, the pervert is an “inherent transgressor” who blurs the gap between particular (secret desire) and universal (prohibitive Law), or between the pleasure principle and the reality principle: “he brings to light, stages, practices the secret fantasies that sustain the predominant public discourse” (248). On the contrary, the hysterical is a permanent skeptic who displays doubt about “whether those secret perverse fantasies are really *it*” (*TTS* 248)—a doubt whether secret desires really contain what they promise. In exercising his rather masculine and aggressive desire, the pervert can identify himself with the ego-ideal in the Symbolic and preclude the eruption of the Unconscious and the resulting “responsible-guilty” sense. He knows well what the normative public discourse wants from him because he becomes its secret pleasure himself as its faithful

³³ Žižek contrasts a hysterical symptom with an obsessive one in the following manner: the former articulates and stages a repressed desire insofar as a hysterical neurotic cannot bear waiting. He procures “too little enjoyment” from the object of desire and his journey to find the right object never ends despite his hectic movement in pursuit of pleasure. On the contrary, the latter stages a punishment for realizing this desire too much. An obsessional neurotic builds up a whole system enabling him to postpone the encounter of the object of desire *ad infinitum* because he does not need one immediately: that is, the object offers him “too much enjoyment.” The immediate encounter with the object is unbearable due to its excessive fullness (*Sublime* 192). This obsessive neurotic explains the symptom of the pervert whose particular object of desire is fully identified with the object of the big Other. The so-called “rape mentality” in *M. Butterfly* signifies this obsessive pathology of the Western colonial fantasy over the East: “Song: Her[the Oriental] mouth says no, but her eyes say yes. The West believes the East, deep down, wants to be dominated—because a woman can’t think for herself” (83). In such a colonial scheme, the East refers to the sexual drive offering the West too much enjoyment.

agent; on the contrary, the hysterical is always in doubt of his ontological gap with the public and thus puts himself in the position of an eternal self-questioning: “What does the Other want from me? What am I for the Other?” (*TTS* 248). This ontological gap, which refers to the inherent impossibility of his absolute identification with the Other, makes him ambivalent about the disciplinary Law of the Symbolic, for the very Law is the pathological cause of hysterical pleasure in the form of censorship. It is because censorship not only affects the status of the marginal or subversive force that the power discourse attempts to repress; but it also creates a split within the power in a Foucauldian sense, an obscene pleasure of resistance in repudiation of the power itself.

In *M. Butterfly*, Song Liling, a male Chinese diva, masquerades as Madame Butterfly in Japanese wig and gown, and his cross-dressing performance is as effective as to dupe his Western lover Rene Gallimard for twenties years. It enables his queer performance to establish an ambiguous identity which does not fit for any specific ethnic and gender categories set up by either Western imperialism or communist nationalism. In this way, he takes on the gazing and commanding position toward Gallimard: “You. White man. I’m looking straight at you.” On the contrary, Gallimard becomes hysterical about his privileged racial and sexual authority over Song: he says, “You[Song] have to do what I say! I’m conjuring you up in my mind!” but Song never obeys him. Song’s transvestic male body in Oriental drag no longer remains the same after Song’s identity turns out queer, which Gallimard denies recognizing. As a result, Gallimard’s colonial fantasy acts upon himself, exposing a fatal symptom that manifests his anxiety for loving the male Butterfly as witnessed in his desperate refusal of seeing Song’s naked body: “You’re only in my mind! All this is in my mind! I order you! To stop!” Song’s queer performance complicates their racial and gender relations to the extent that Song in a Butterfly costume demands Gallimard to remain the foreign devil for “the Perfect Woman”: “I’m your Butterfly. Under the robes, beneath everything it was always me. Now, open your

eyes and admit it—you adore me.” His queer role-playing once sustained Gallimard’s “pure imagination” in the Symbolic, but now is mocking it with the obscene pleasure of being queer. Upon seeing Song naked, the hysterical Gallimard frantically refuses to see it because he “knew all the time somewhere that [his] happiness was temporary, [his] love a deception...To make the wait bearable.” Gallimard’s anxiety for not facing the truth transubstantiates Gallimard the perverted into Gallimard the hysterical, for seeing Song naked means to him “no more enjoyment,” no more Madame Butterfly. His anxiety as such is a symptomatic failure of maintaining the ontological distance between himself and the imaginary object, out of which emerges his colonial fantasy. That is, Gallimard’s recognition of Song as homosexual transvestite prompts the return of the repressed—that is, his ontological gap as homosexual and trans-racial, which is a deadly reality to his colonial authority. This brings about the collapse of Gallimard’s symbolic identity as white heterosexual man and drives him to ask Song a painful question: “what exactly are you.” In fact, this becomes an unanswerable question thrown to his negative self with an ontological gap that makes him no longer a normative member of Western society. What he asks of Song turns back on him, implying *who am I?* Song’s queer performance as a male Butterfly eventually returns as the mirrored self of Gallimard himself: a white queer who has loved the homosexual Song. If Song’s identity as male Butterfly is a vulgar displacement of Gallimard’s sexual and racial desire, the former is a substituting signifier of the phallus that the latter lacks and desires. By watching Song naked with a penis in court, Gallimard’s ontological gap, which been repressed under his symbolic identity with colonial authority returns back to his positive self: he *becomes* his own phallus.

Gallimard’s fear of seeing Song naked is attributed to his symptomatic anxiety that he is unable to live up to the hegemonic discourse that constitutes his symbolic identity as white heterosexual, and his queer identity as homosexual, transgender, and trans-racial lets him lose his ontological consistency in the Symbolic, which leads him to self-destruction. In

psychoanalytic terms, a symptom appears as a signifying formation that the power discourse confers on its meaning to interpret and cure. Given that, the subject is the locus of symptom insofar as its ontological substance is constituted and disciplined by the ideological discourse of the Symbolic and works as its agent. On the contrary, fantasy is an inert construction that cannot be analyzed and resists interpretation. It refers to a fundamental desire of the subject to resist the remedial interpretation of eruptive symptoms and to secure the distance from the Symbolic while making efforts to repress its own ontological gap (*TSOI* 74). In this sense, fantasy represents the subject's ontological paradox that obscures the ontological binary of subjective and objective. Fantasy comes out as the projection of secret desire in the dominant discourse of the Symbolic onto the subject, through which the desire staged in fantasy becomes not only the subject's own but also others'. Thus, the fundamental question of desire is concerned not so much with what I want as with what others want from me or what am I for those others (*HRL* 49).

The subject's projected desire onto others in the form of fantasy is essential to an understanding of Gallimard's representational crisis in his distorted relationship with Song, who inversely projects his own fantasy onto Gallimard, which displaces their colonial relationship. In fantasy, Gallimard is deprived of his *subjective* experience due to the obscured division of subject and other (as his mirrored self), so that fantasy makes him feel deprived of the core of his being, since he can never consciously experience it and assume it. The colonial discourse of the West that constitutes the East as "metaphors of depth, secrecy, and sexual promise" (*Orientalism* 222) cannot take effect unless the ontological *distance* between the subject and the imaginary object of fantasy is secured as Gallimard's wife, Helga, points out: "East is east, west is west."

Gallimard's symptom that seeing naked women causes him impotent, therefore, indicates his representational crisis, which is caused by the discrepancy between his symbolic identity as white heterosexual and his real one—homosexual transvestite. In fact, he confesses to Toulon

his failure in distancing himself from fantasy: “Tell them there’s a natural affinity between the West and the Orient.” Here, the not so much colonial as “natural affinity” is translated as an inherent similarity and attraction between narcissistic homosexuals. This is compared to the site of mutual and mutable hybridization, what Homi Bhabha calls the “third space” in “Frontlines/Borderposts”: it is the indeterminate spaces in-between subject-positions considered the locale of the disruption and displacement of hegemonic colonial narratives of cultural structures and practices. This ontological immediacy between Gallimard and Song which causes identificatory indeterminacy in terms of homosexuality makes the former unable to secure the minimal distance with the latter to project his colonial fantasy over Song. Eventually, the desire for Butterfly projected onto Song’s male body returns to him, turning himself into his own object-cause of (homosexual) fantasy.

At last, Gallimard faces the long-awaited truth, the repressed dimension of what he has desired—queer Butterfly. Compared to Cio-Cio San’s pierced and wounded dead body in *Madame Butterfly*, this *unfathomable* Thing is nothing but a failed signifier that remains not symbolized in the symbolic reality of Western modernity. Song’s queer Butterfly as such cannot maintain its ontological consistency with the hegemonic discourse of heterosexual normativity. Moreover, such a monstrous presence of queer Butterfly with a penis becomes what defines Gallimard as well: homosexual, trans-racial, and trans-gender. His anxiety over Song’s nakedness is none other than the traumatic return of the repressed Real, his love of queer Butterfly. Gallimard’s attachment to the queer undermines the colonial authority of Western cultural imperialism. It is no wonder that he becomes “impotent” in complying with the symbolic Law that has empowered him as the white devil in China. In other words, he ends up as a pathological site of a symptom that needs to be cured and eliminated.

Disidentification of Queer Butterfly

The queer Butterfly not only makes Gallimard come out as homosexual and trans-racial but also works as the return of the repressed Real in the hegemonic reality of Western imperialism. The inaccessible locus of the Real is equivalent to the excessive otherness in the ontological kernel of the symbolic subject. As homosexual, trans-racial, and transgender, Gallimard becomes an unidentifiable void in the colonial order of things. On the one hand, the queer Butterfly, as the return of the repressed Real, has its oppositional dimension as a local struggle against the dominant discourse of oppression and discrimination. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José E. Muñoz defines it as “disidentification,” a new discursive possibility to produce multiple subjectivities empowering minority identity. According to Muñoz, the queer as a deconstructive presence is what cracks the “code of majority” based on white-centered heterosexual normativity and proceeds to reverse this code as “raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (30-1). Namely, performing queerness refers to the process of disidentifying and consistently seeking the Real that can create alternative meanings which have not been properly lined up before.

Song as queer Butterfly *disidentifies* himself out of the hegemonic codes of normative ideologies according to which his identity is determined racially, sexually, nationally, etc. in terms of what Gayatri Spivak calls an “epistemic violence.”³⁴ In addition, Song’s queer relationship with Gallimard makes his Western lover lose his ontological consistency with the privileged subject position as Westerner in the gendered trope of race. In reality, Gallimard chooses his entire ontology to be queer through the process of disidentification, and this not so much compromises his privileged racial and gender positionality as maintains his excessive

³⁴ The question of epistemic violence is related to the ownership of authority to produce knowledge, dealing with issues such as who produces knowledge, or how power and desire appropriate and condition the production of knowledge. For more in detail, see Gayatri C. Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

enjoyment of being queer. We can see this in that he is eager to kill himself for his queer pleasure. Gallimard's queer identity is what embodies the ontological gap of the Real in the Symbolic—a pathological symptom that should be eliminated for the ideological consistency of the Symbolic. In this regard, Muñoz's notion of disidentification is de-subjectifying the subject from hegemonic discourse of dominant ideology, and its most radical realization leads to nothing but the death drive.

Gallimard's question toward Song, "what exactly are you?," shows his ontological dilemma about his queerness. Interestingly, Song becomes perplexed about the question: "Song: Rene, how can you ask—?" It might not be difficult to imagine that Gallimard would ask himself after Song's question: Who on earth am I? His ultimate answer to Song's return question comes down to this: "I am pure imagination... My name is Rene Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly." Just as Cio-Cio San does in *Madame Butterfly*, Gallimard kills himself via seppuku. His self-destruction concludes the life-long process of completing the impossible union between his ideological "substance as subject" (the symbolic self as white male with colonial authority) and his "absolute subject" (the Real-self fantasizing the queer white male in a Japanese wig and gown).³⁵ It closes up the ontological gap of his divided—or castrated in Freudian terms—subjectivity in pursuit of his ego-ideal: he ends up dead as trans-racial, trans-gender, and homosexual, a queer body dead in jail, a repressed space in the punitive Law of the Symbolic. Despite his queerness, on the contrary, Song survives. I suppose this is because he has been skeptical enough to distinguish fantasy (desire) from reality (taboo) as witnessed in his final

³⁵ Žižek contrasts "absolute subject" with "substance as subject" in regard to the dialectical constitution of subjectivity. The former is an impossible state of the subject absolutely internalizing ideological substance. He describes it as an "actual universal subject [that] emerges only at the end of the [dialectical] process, and is no longer opposed to substance but truly encompasses it." This impossible state of being is actually not different from that of 'substance as subject,' for either state refers to the same condition at its purest level: subject as substance or vice versa without being dialectically opposed to each other. See *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* on p. 76.

words: “Butterfly? Butterfly?” While Song’s queer performance has been so powerful as to lead Gallimard to self-destruction, Gallimard’s queerness is put to a deathly end. This, I argue, shows Hwang’s play is obsessed with deconstructing Puccini’s opera where the geisha has to sacrifice herself for her Western lover as well as colonizer. Instead of having both Song and Gallimard put to death, Hwang chooses only Gallimard to die for his queer pleasure, which obscures the binaries of East/West, male/female, performance/essence, subject/other, etc. In this regard, I find this problematic in Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*: Song gives up on his oppositional queerness and re-normalizes his identity as Chinese man by revealing his penis in the court. This is a confessional ritual to reclaim his racial and sexual identities as pre-determined by the Law of the Symbolic which excludes queerness. His postcolonial performance is what resists being co-opted back into the conservative scheme of normative sexual and racial identities. On the other hand, Hwang’s decision to have Gallimard commit suicide in Butterfly gown and wig results in restoring the systemic consistency of the Symbolic in which queerness leads to self-killing. Gallimard’s death via seppuku is essentially caused by the impossible union between his queer identity and Madame Butterfly as a reification of colonial fantasy. In this regard, Hwang’s postcolonial re-fashioning of Madame Butterfly as queer is successful in that it de-essentializes, de-familiarizes Madame Butterfly’s colonial materiality as obscene, perverted, and oppositional in terms of disidentification. Nonetheless, it needs to be taken into account that the disidentification of Butterfly as queer does not guarantee any political alternative to reform the power discourse that puts Gallimard to death. In the performances of both Cio-Cio San and Gallimard as Butterfly, what survives both colonial and postcolonial narratives is the ideological consistency of the universe that privileges white heterosexuals against the racial and queer Other.

Queer Performance as Political Alternative

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng concludes her chapter on *M. Butterfly* in an interesting way: “The difficult lesson of [the play] is...not that fantasy exists...but the more politically distressing idea that fantasy may be the very way in which we come to know and love someone—to come to know and love ourselves” (127). Her point is that one’s sexual and racial identification accompanies a process of fantasizing others through which “who I am” is also defined in return. This is nothing but a narcissistic reflection or projection of the self onto the other. Thus, identifying the Other is equivalent to recognizing something in me more than myself—a fantastic thing that I believe is alien to me. Given this, the process of subject formation necessitates both fetishizing and fantasizing the Other against which we play a role in our Self, in terms of performativity, to become who we desire while gazing at our counterpart in both love and jealousy.

To cut it short, self-identification is essentially based on misrecognition or self-deception; moreover, our subjectivity develops in a fashion to deal with the internalized foreignness that comes from both narcissistic projection of our Self onto the Other and fetishistic introjection of the latter onto the former. As a result, the subject always already contains an ontological gap in itself. Due to the ontological intervention of the Other in me, I must be able to differentiate subject from object; otherwise, I would become melancholic because my subjectivity becomes de-centered or schizophrenic. In this regard, Cheng insists that Gallimard performing the sexual and racial Other as queer Butterfly is melancholic, for he displays a condition of identificatory confusion in which both subject and object become indistinguishable from each other (*TMR* 123).

The narcissistic formation of subjectivity, in this regard, cannot be taken into account without the problem of ethics, for recognizing the ontological foreignness of the subject is made possible only in relation to something that belongs to the other. Both identification of the self and recognition of the other can never be fully completed without taking, as Judith Butler puts it,

“part of what I am [as] the enigmatic traces of others,” and it always leaves inside of me unknowingness that makes me responsible for the other (46). Given the ethical dimension of subject formation as indebted to the presence of the Other, I contend that Cheng does not fully appreciate *M. Butterfly* as purely postcolonial. She suggests that Gallimard is portrayed as a fully developed character whose desire is articulated even though he ends up dead because of his queer desire being realized. On the contrary, Song remains, as Cheng puts it, “either the object of Gallimard’s desire or as the critic of that desire” (*TMR* 125). She observes that the homosexual Chinese man in Oriental drag functions only as an accessorial figure to complete Gallimard as a desiring subject who is ethically responsible for the queer desire in himself: to be Madame Butterfly. I see otherwise, however.

Regarding Gallimard’s melancholic self-killing, Cheng’s point is that Song’s queerness is performed as subordinate to performativity of colonialist narrative by supporting the white man’s ethical/responsible performance. If so, we may have to see Cio-Cio San’s self-killing in *Madame Butterfly* as melancholic and ethical as well because her death is altruistic. Her exotic subjectivity is sacrificed for the ideological consistency of Western imperialism because her particular ontology is an obstacle to it. In the colonial universe where Pinkerton’s white heterosexual family ideology is normative, the geisha’s existence is nothing but a vanishing mediator. Namely, she is responsible and guilty for her own being excluded, which leads to her self-destruction. The point is that Cio-Cio San is fundamentally prevented from making her own political gesture to remain otherwise—for instance, not only to keep alive but also to keep the baby—against the Symbolic that puts her to death. At stake is that the ethical operates as an ideological apparatus to uphold the contingent structure of Western modernity as universal. In that regard, her ethical as well as self-sacrificing gesture of self-destruction is part of colonial discourse that legitimizes the hegemonic universe of the West. Her death is not much different from a religious sacrifice for the redemption of the colonial West per se.

Compared to Cio-Cio San, however, Song in *M. Butterfly* appears to have a political choice by revealing himself naked, by giving up on performing Madame Butterfly. Unlike Gallimard whose queerness eats all up his normative subjectivity, Song can repress his ontological gap again or manipulate his Butterfly performance as detached from his Chinese-man self. He crosses both racial and gender boundaries by performing queerness, only to return to his normative self at his own will. His queer performance of having multiple subjectivities is done by his politically oriented choice to resist being subordinate to the hegemonic Other: “Rene! I’ll never put on those robes again! You’ll be sorry.” Considering this, he is not only a desiring subject but also a skeptical one who can refuse what the Western Other wants from him via his queer performance. As Muñoz points out, queer performance is an efficient counter-public strategy to seek freedom which is “called on by minoritarian subjects throughout their everyday life” (179). Consequently, I see Song as a disidentifying figure who politically—not ethically—chooses to be queer and thus to survive ideological state apparatus which employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation.

Chapter 2

Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song*:
Asian Bodies Dancing on the Stage of American Empire

In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey examines the structure of gender hierarchy and inequality in the cinema, focusing on the relationship between cinematic representation and spectatorship in gendered terms. In this framework, the voyeuristic gaze of spectatorship is considered male, active, and sadistic vis-à-vis the spectacle of the female body on the screen. Mulvey argues that women's eroticism in the cinema poses a threat to male spectatorship to such an extent that female sexuality evokes castration from the male spectator, which labels it obscene, demoralizing, and transgressive. Similarly, the Western cinema has stereotypically portrayed Asian women as either the "lotus blossom" (submissive Oriental geisha) or the "dragon lady" (aggressive femme fatale) (Shimizu 18)—a symptom of anxiety that casts Oriental sexuality in the identifiable form of either femininity or decadence. Through an analysis of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's 1961 musical film *Flower Drum Song*, this chapter suggests that Asian women's racialized and gendered sexuality disrupts the ideological consistency of American spectatorship. I contend that American spectatorship takes shape at the expense of the sexualized and racialized performance of Asian bodies. My analysis develops further into how the masculine spectatorship of white supremacy interacted with U.S. nation-building as Empire during the Cold War era.

The original Broadway production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song* opened in 1958, directed by Gene Kelly, marking many interesting milestones in Broadway history. It was the first outing for Kelly as a director on Broadway and featured a mostly Asian and Asian American cast for the first time in Broadway history, and included well-known Asian American

performers, such as Miyoshi Umeki, Keye Luke, and Pat Suzuki. Loosely based on C. Y. Lee's "more dark-humored" (*Oriental* 173) 1957 hit novel of the same title, this revolutionary musical³⁶ was a huge success both aesthetically and commercially. The musical *Flower Drum Song* was nominated for six Tony Awards, winning a Best Conductor and Musical Director Award, was performed on national tours and in London, and in turn was adapted for a musical film in 1961. David H. Hwang adapted it in 2002 to rework the stereotypical representation of Asian Americans in the original, writing a new libretto for the show. Despite Hwang's rewrite, well received upon its opening in LA, some criticized it for spoiling Rodgers and Hammerstein's original *Flower Drum Song* when it opened on Broadway—that is, for losing "the charm, warmth, and wit of the original" (Murray).

The film adaptation of the musical *Flower Drums Song* was also a commercial hit. Directed by Henry Koster in 1961, the movie version won an Academy Award, and one of its musical numbers, "I Enjoy Being a Girl," is still popular today. Moreover, this film was included in the National Film Registry in 2008 as designed to display the full range and diversity of American film heritage. As witnessed in the announcement of the Library of Congress National Film Registry, the film has been celebrated as being "culturally, historically, [and] aesthetically significant"³⁷ in the history of American cinema. At last, its DVD version was released in 2006 with extra features on the making and casting of the movie. Its long-lasting popularity across generations, in fact, informs us about more than its artistic and commercial achievement in American pop culture; its significance also lies in the radical change of U.S. immigration policy on Asians in the 1950s which is still affecting the life of Asian Americans today. This

³⁶ *Flower Drum Song* is revolutionary not only in that it features the all Asian cast but also in that it is the only musical about 'Asian American' characters, rather than about Asians in Asia as in, for example, *South Pacific*, *King and I*, and *Miss Saigon*.

³⁷ Designed to display the full range and diversity of American film heritage, the National Film Registry preserves each year up to 25, as a Library of Congress website puts it, "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant films."
<<http://www.loc.gov/avconservation/theater/schedule.html>>.

extravaganza displays how Asians in America become embraced as *real* Americans, in repudiation of the prewar racial formation of Asian bodies as “permanent alien.” When the movie was released in the 1960s, the stereotype that Asian Americans are inassimilable to mainstream culture was widely received. At the same time, The Sixties, known as an ebullient decade of the mixture of counter culture and social revolution, marked a dramatic shift in Asian American representation to an extent that the “model minority” myth was created as one way of labeling Asian Americans in the U.S.

I analyze this cinematic fantasy, produced on the verge of the civil rights movement, in two ways. This paper shows how the performing bodies of Asian women in the film work as an ideological utility of Cold War propaganda, and examines the potential of the particular sexuality of Asian bodies disrupting the ideological edifice of neoliberal multiculturalism.

Flower Drum Song praises the ideological expansion of what Anne Cheng calls “Americanism.” The performance of dancing Asian bodies on the artificial stage of 1960s San Francisco Chinatown makes it all the more “difficult to distinguish fact from fantasy” (Fong 192). In the film, American spectators see the entire Asian cast dance to a number called “Chop Suey,” a combination of all major Euro-American dance forms, such as square dance, waltz, rock, and jazz. Their unfamiliar but seamless movement, on the one hand, implies a celebration of hybrid identity, multicultural assimilation, and triumphantism of liberal democracy and citizenship; on the other, their performance refers to the cosmopolitan trope of mimicry, subversion, and chaos. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey describes modernity as a “never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself” (12). Similarly, these *modernized* ethnic subjects place themselves in the everlasting process of *never becoming themselves*, causing a primordial form of anxiety in American spectatorship in terms of the return of the repressed.

Neoliberal Subject with “Cheating” Identity

In *Performing Asian America*, Josephine Lee stresses the necessity of being careful about defining a “real Asian American theater” when employing W.E.B. Du Bois’ ideal goals of minority theaters today. Epitomized in such phrases as “about us,” “by us,” “for us,” and “near us” (134), his agenda for Afro-American players endorsed the cultural assumption of collective racial identity in the binary of black and white in the pre-civil rights movement era. In support of Lisa Linda Lowe, Lee observes that such over-generalization of racial categories in the theatrical activity of minorities can easily “skew the idea of ‘Asian America’ toward certain kinds of experience...in favor of a totalizing ‘Asian American’ identity” (9). Du Bois places emphasis on the collective integrity of racial identity to engender an autonomous authority for self-fulfilling performances. On the contrary, both Lee and Linda Lowe prioritize differences, diversities, and heterogeneities within the racial identity as often sacrificed in the homogenizing process of identity politics for political struggle and collective representation. What crosses both parties beneath the obverse tension is their primordial anxiety about self-representation, for the bodies of racial Other in the U.S. are subject to the libidinal economy of desire, stereotype, and fantasy. The “long line of Western misrepresentation of Asians” (Yoshikawa 276) has become the platform for the public perception of Asian identity in America, rendering them hysterical about their being stereotyped all the time.

The film starts with animated opening credits with Orient-flavored music, portraying a ship entering the Bay Area underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. Both the animated images and Oriental notes of the opening credits seem to evoke from their American audience a feeling of the cinematic reality remote from actual reality, like a fairy tale. In the ship is Mei Li who has stowed away from Hong Kong to San Francisco with her father in order to fulfill her marriage contract with the brash club owner Sammy Fong. Soon she realizes that her mail order fiancé has been dating his glamorous showgirl Linda Low. To dissuade her from marrying him, Fong

introduces Mei Li to Madame Liang, who has been searching for a daughter-in-law of Master Wang Chi-yang, the patriarch of an opulent traditional Chinese family. Persuaded by her sister-in-law Liang, Master Wang Chi-Yang follows her idea to allow both Mei Li and his first son Wang Ta to fall in love with each other naturally. Against their will, though, dazzled by the charms of Linda, Wang Ta announces his intention to marry her, though she in fact uses him to get a real commitment from her lover Fong. After some twists and turns, these young men and women finally realize their true love for one another, despite the marriage contract binding both Mei Li and Fong in marriage. Their conflicting love relations are not even put in place until the wedding ceremony, where Mei Li declares that because she is an illegal immigrant, the contract is invalid, confessing “I am a wetback.” Instantly, the double couples, Mei Li and Wang Ta, and Linda and Fong, decide to marry on the spot, resulting in a double wedding and making all the parties happy after all.

Despite its production with the all-Asian cast, *Flower Drum Song* has been reputed as *enjoying*, as Josephine Lee puts it, the “legacy of the Oriental stereotypes” (13). Discussing the continued practice of Asian Americans performing their own stereotypes throughout the twentieth century, Lee sees the cinematic production of the musical as ironic: “for the most part, fame and fortune, if any, could be earned only by playing versions of a stereotype” (14). She quotes Misha Berson’s comment on the musical: “a wise Confucian patriarch, a China Doll vamp, a submissive, fresh-off-the-boat bride [which are] familiar Asian stereotypes dressed up in new clothes” (14). In fact, the movie portrays its characters as well fit for the stereotypes of Asians in America. Among those archetypal Asian Americans in the film is Master Wang as a pre-modern, inassimilable Chinese patriarch in a large family. In particular, despite their obvious difference in sexuality, both Mei-Li³⁸ and Linda Low³⁹ can be seen as a double signifying two

³⁸ In both musical and cinematic versions of *Flower Drum Song*, Miyoshi Umeki plays the role of Mei Li. As a naturalized Japanese American actress, she was already well-known for

divergent objects of desire evoked from the same Orientalized body in American spectatorship: Mei-Li as submissive geisha and Linda as hypersexual dragon lady.

At stake, however, is whether both Mei-Li and Linda Low's performances are wholly consistent with the cultural consumption of Asian stereotypes in the U.S. If their performing bodies are transparently stereotypical, they are nothing but an ideological utility of what Slavoj Žižek terms a "purely material sincerity." Indebted to the Marxist notion of commodity fetishism, this notion relates to a ceremonial—i.e., performative—ritual to materialize ideology, the subject rendered stereotypical at its purest functions as an ideological utility: "[The] 'purely material sincerity' of the external ideological ritual, not the depth of the subject's inner convictions and desires, is the true locus of the fantasy which sustains an ideological edifice" (*Plague* 6). Here, fantasy has a double function. Firstly, fantasy is an ideological investment in a performative ritual that mediates between the formal symbolic structure (the gendered/racialized spectatorship of the West) and its ideological utility (its fetishized commodity to substitute for the a priori object of desire); thus fantasy "teaches us how to desire." Secondly, fantasy not only obfuscates the real, "the horror" beneath the stereotypical layer of ideological reality but also creates what it purports to conceal as its "repressed point of reference" (*Plague* 7). Having this in mind, we will see first how American spectatorship incorporates the cinematic fantasy of the

her role in the 1957 film *Sayonara* as the Japanese wife of American Air Force officer Joe Kelly, dying for their forbidden love against the law of the U.S. military. Reminiscent of the Japanese geisha Cio-Cio San in *Madame Butterfly*, her image of submissive Oriental girl from the film affected the reception of her role as Mei Li in *Flower Drum Song*.

³⁹ As a major sex symbol in the 1960s, Nancy Kwan plays Linda Low in the film. Despite the all-Asian cast in *Flower Drum Song*, a few exceptions are there, and Kwan was one of them as long as she has Chinese father and Scottish mother. The most obvious case is, of course, the African American actress Juanita Hall who plays Madame 'Auntie' Liang in both musical and cinematic versions. Similar to the case of Mei Li, Low's hypersexuality in the film is also indebted to the performer's previous role; in her first 1960-debut film *The World of Suzie Wong*, she plays the starring role of a beautiful Hong Kong prostitute, Suzie Wong, captivating American architect Robert Lomax.

Asian body (ideological utility) into the off-stage context of neoliberal Cold War ideology via *Flower Drum Song*.

Fresh off the boat, Mei-Li reifies “Old World” feminine beauty as an ideal reproductive partner for an increasingly established minority community. Her identity as subtle Eastern femininity reflects one of the primary themes of the film: that is, the “transformation of Asians into Asian Americans, from aliens to citizens” (Cheng 32). In the historical context of the 1950s through the 1960s, her Oriental identity becomes the crucial element of the triumphalism of neoliberal capitalism that transforms “race into a cultural icon and commodity in the marketplace of multiculturalism” (Nguyen 10). During this time, the model minority myth began to form, a discourse that Asians in the U.S. are politically silent and ethnically assimilable. This myth corresponds to and confirms the ideological discourse of neoliberal individualism that a successful ethnic assimilation results from stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement. Moreover, the U.S. of The Sixties underwent a radical shift of ideological paradigm which took place on a global scale; the ideological as well as militaristic confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet during the Cold War necessitated the former to build an affinity between whites and Asians to hedge against the communist expansionism of the latter. Against this historical backdrop, *Flower Drum Song* served as an agent to carry out, as David Palumbo-Liu puts it, “the process of assimilation, the negotiations of the foreign and the domestic, the renegotiation of Americanism in modernity” (159). The successful transformation of the Oriental from the exotic to the assimilable was, after all, white America’s ideological assignment to cope with the anxiety and fear about Soviet communism, race mixing, and transgressive sexuality in the early Cold War era.

In an early scene, Mei-Li sings “A Hundred Million Miracles.” This song, with its patriarchal opening “My father says,” begins the musical’s larger narrative of “miracles,” such as immigrant success, assimilation, and romantic happy ending. A docile, childlike girl, Mei-Li is

a suitable character for the ideological leitmotif of Americanization in the political context of the Cold War. To American spectators, she is a model Orient woman who is ready to serve her new adoptive country; as the lyric says, she is “Very Pretty!” However, her Oriental, feminine, and modest character also shows itself to be not always obedient and innocent in the face of adversity. Mei-Li takes the lead in illegally bringing her aging and ineffectual father to the U.S., and insistently demands that, despite his desperate refusal,⁴⁰ Sammy Fong fulfill his arraigned marriage to her (*Oriental*s 178). She also figures out how to break off her impending wedding ceremony at the end. Moreover, her contradictory status as both illegal immigrant and model minority can be disturbing to the American spectator in light of changing U.S. policies of immigration and naturalization. That is to say, the alien who has violated the law, as its ideal citizen subject, must also legitimize the law.

Mei-Li almost single-handedly transforms herself into an American. Becoming “an inveterate consumer of television” (*Oriental*s 178), she timidly but shrewdly learns both American consumer culture and how to subvert her arranged marriage. Watching a romantic drama on late night television, she hears the heroine declare that she is unable to marry, given her status as an illegal immigrant from Mexico. Given Homi Bhabha’s notion of “colonial mimicry,”⁴¹ Mei-Li’s self-reliant practice of learning the “American way” for herself and assimilating into it is not so much admirable as perplexing for the American spectator: that is, the gaze of the colonized displaces the colonizer’s look of disciplinary surveillance, which results in the colonial effect of identificatory mimicry reversing colonial authority. Further, Mei-Li’s inaccurate self-identification as a “wetback” (she declares “My back is wet”) obfuscates her illegal status, a

⁴⁰ Fong’s frustration and anxiety for Mei-Li’s obstinate demand to marry him is well expressed in his song, “Don’t Marry Me” in the film. Its lyric reveals his misogynic attitude.

⁴¹ Homi Bhabha observes that the construction of the colonial subject demands a repeated articulation of forms of difference in the ambivalent process of stereotyping. This performative reiteration of forms of difference in recognizing the Other inscribes on the subject body “the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination of power” (67).

naïve but sly trick that allows her to successfully marry Wang Ta and evade her deportation. In other words, by exposing herself as an illegal object of transgression, she can claim the American dream of marrying for romantic love. Her public confession and self-indictment at the wedding ironically accelerates the naturalization process by successfully concealing the Asiatic image of the yellow peril from her “cheating” identity. In the same vein, Anne Cheng aptly states: “Mei-Li’s deft and timely verbal plagiarism reminds us that the popular cultural narrative of America has always already included sites of transgression that are detours through which one arrives at the ‘home-ness’” (44).

On a theoretical level, Mei-Li’s double identity, which cheats the American spectator, is concerned with the politically salient use of a so-called “performative contradiction.” Žižek explains that the ruling ideology can possibly claim its universality only when grounded upon the continuing exclusion of its own particulars that contradict its dominant discourse and challenge its power. The hegemonic system of the ruling ideology makes this process of exclusion a consistent routine in a persistent manner of questioning, renegotiating, and displacing the oppositional particulars—i.e., of “assuming the gap between its own form and content, by conceiving itself as unaccomplished in its very notion.” Žižek likens to *cheating* the paradoxical formation of the universal hegemony of a ruling ideology, which in fact has recourse to its insubordinate particulars. He continues:

[I]f the ruling ideology performatively ‘cheats’ by undermining...its own officially asserted universality, progressive politics should precisely openly practice performative contradiction, asserting on behalf of the given universality the very content this universality (in its hegemonic form) excludes. (“Class Struggle” 102)

The self-imposed cheating of a *particular* subject refers to the ideological practice of performative contradiction that the ruling ideology carries out to maintain its own universal

hegemony via the paradoxical denial of its own totality; moreover, the universal edifice of the ruling ideology fundamentally depends on the exclusion of its particular subjects inassimilable to it. On the other hand, such a paradoxical, which Žižek translates as cheating, identity of the inassimilable subjects also creates a performative locus of inconsistency, exclusion, and exception in the hegemonic space of the ruling ideology as a kind of buffer zone between the universal (the ruling ideology) and the particular (the subject of exclusion). This buffer zone, or ideological gap, works as a sort of structural short circuit between them, for the act of cheating is what they both want from each other for their own sake. In light of progressive politics, the particular subject, the inconsistent site of exclusion, can appropriate the self-contradictory performance of cheating for its own exclusive inclusion as the perverse site of exception. The performative contradiction of the U.S. neoliberal expansionism enables Mei-Li to become the inconsistent subject of exception—a female Oriental illegal-immigrant who marries for love and can be *naturalized* as a lawful citizen subject. Nonetheless, it is not so much obvious as problematic to assume that her desire to be American citizen is spontaneously transparent and self-oriented. On the one hand, the hegemonic ideology of Cold War neoliberalism wants the particular Oriental to be exceptionally included in its ideological edifice and thus to function as its ideological utility. Ethnic minorities, on the other hand, look for American citizenship in pursuit of their full inclusion as legitimate members of U.S. society and want to be blessed with what the liberal tropes of freedom and consumer culture promise to them. But the promise of making free choices in the liberal society of U.S. consumer culture is not made as purely sincere but pretended. In *Transnational America*, Inderpal Grewal premises that the dissemination of American neoliberalism played a crucial role in upholding the hegemonic authority of the U.S. as neoliberal Empire. She posits that this role “could not be limited to the institutions of the state but circulated within what came to be called a ‘global civil society’” (1-2). The universalizing force of global civil society leaves no choice for people in its consumer culture

but to be participants in “the civilizing work of post industrial society, in which serious labor is put into producing the conditions of consciousness in which buying can occur” (30). Asians’ desire for American citizenship should be considered not so much a transparently self-serving choice as a constituted one, for no other choices can possibly be made to remain *un-civilized* in U.S. neoliberal capitalism. In this framework, Mei-Li’s double identity bears upon her politically-salient use of “performative contradiction,” by which she becomes a member of American civil society with a free but pretended choice—namely, a choice only to become American and thus civilized.

Ritual, Confession, and Rebirth.

Mei-Li’s double identity as both ideal citizen and illegal alien is informed by the eschatological zeitgeist of the Cold War era. The zeitgeist of the Cold War era is closely related to the mythological belief of the post-war U.S., which is reminiscent of Manifest Destiny. After WWII, the U.S. employed an unprecedented policy that embraces illegal aliens to legitimize or *redeem* them as her civilized subjects and sublimates neoliberal multiculturalism, a historic gesture to open a new era of the Cold War. In fact, the post-war U.S., as the cosmopolitan metropolis of global capitalism, is equivalent to the Promised Land where everybody comes to have a second chance to get *reborn* in the face of the satanic enemy of the Red Communist. Reminiscent of the Christian theme of regeneration and redemption, the cultural, political, and racial assimilation of Asians into the post-war U.S. obviously necessitated not so much their *seamless* identification as American as their exotic “foreignness” for a chance to be reborn.⁴² As Jon Stratton mentions,

⁴² In *Cold War Orientalism*, Christina Klein raises a question on the ending scene of *Flower Drum Song* as to why Wang Ta gets married to Mei-Li (partly Americanized with foreignness), rather than Linda Low (already Americanized). She suggests that, because Mei-Li is the heroin who holds “assimilation in balance with ethnicity,” she is more suitable for making emphasis on “the dual identity of Chinese Americans that gave them value as Americans.” She continues, hardly advocating the idea of the melting pot, this film prefers to show Asians’

the Cold War created a mythical world of apocalypse where people dream of seeing an omnipotent presence like the Christ emerge and bring them redemption: that is, “America as European bourgeoisie fantasy” (30). This eschatological vision during the early Cold War that Western people projected upon the U.S. reconfigured her as the post-apocalyptic Promised Land, particularly from the 50s to the 60s: “the post-apocalyptic New World Order [was] constructed in terms of a utopian myth of a world concert of democratic states all operating within an endlessly dynamic global capitalism” (Stratton 38). Yet this post-apocalyptic vision for the Promised Land not only turned immigrants into the defective subject with original sin, but also remolded them into the baptized subject of reincarnation as reborn American citizens. The neoliberal universality of the U.S. can establish its ideological legitimacy based on the presence of illegal aliens, and *Flower Drum Song* bears witness to this. Theater & film historian Laurence Malson remarks, this musical film “gets caught in this net of what we call ‘cultural appropriation’” (*FDS DVD*). As a typical cinematic genre of dance, song, and performance combined, this film is compared to a kind of primordial ritual which make heterogeneous people from the old world have a collective sense of the new world by connecting the present time to the past time through performative participation. Moreover, the dance numbers and narrative structure of the film, with its themes of assimilation and naturalization, are equivalent to the birth myth of a new national identity, which is another key element of building a collective identity as exemplified in the lyrics of “Chop Suey.”⁴³ The myth of the birth of a collective community refers to “a narrative that...is shared by a group of people who believe that it is credible, explains their collective identity, and illuminates their present condition” (Young 339). In a similar vein, the post-apocalyptic vision of the U.S. as the Promised Land

“partial foreignness,” for it makes them “worth assimilating into American society,” legitimating “the nation's claim to be ‘a nation of nations’” (240-1).

⁴³ Here is part of the lyrics of “Chop Suey”: “Chop suey, chop suey! Living here is very much like chop suey.... Chop Suey, chop suey! Mixed with all the hokum and bally hooey. Something real and glowing grand. Sheds a light all over the land. Boston, Austin, Wichita, and St. Louey, chop suey.”

requires what Žižek calls a “perverse ritual,” which stages “the act of castration, of the primordial loss which allows the subject to enter the symbolic order” (*Plagues* 14). The analogy between assimilation and castration in ethnic studies is, among many others, found in Aihwa Ong’s *Buddha Is Hiding*. She argues that the assimilation of Asians in America accompanies feminizing, i.e., “genderizing” Asian ethnicities and castrating Asian nationalist discourse and cultural nationalism (167). Lisa Linda Lowe also explores the Althusserian notion of ideological interpellation in light of “splitting the subject as the castration of the subject upon entering language and social relations” (*IA* 145-6).

Therefore, the combination of “flower, drum, song”⁴⁴ from the title can be translated as the staged scenery on which exotic Asians transform into feminine Asian Americans through the ritualistic ceremony of conversion—that is, Americanization. It is equivalent to the nationalistic ritual for both legal and illegal immigrants from Asia becoming reborn and thus Americanized as legitimate citizen subjects. As David Palumbo-Liu has observed, the “racial frontier” as “the liminal space of pre-Americanization” (101) not only is established around the boundaries of the country across the Pacific but also exists within the heart of America as implied in the lyric of “Grant Avenue”: “A western street with eastern manners... You travel there in a trolley... Dong! Dong! You’re in Hong Kong... on Grant Avenue. Where is that?—San Francisco. That’s where’s that! California U.S.A.” In a rather practical sense, it was imperative for the post-war U.S. to embrace alien bodies from Asia for national as well as human resources: “the anxiety over the hybrid [subject] must be tamed as contact with Asia under the imperatives of Cold War policies made itself a permanent part of the American landscape, not only as labor, but as sexualized and reproductive force” (Palumbo-Liu 102). Both Asians and Americans find an outlet for their repressed anxiety by suturing racial, cultural, and generational

⁴⁴ As to the title of the musical *Flower Drum Song*, Oscar Hammerstein says in an 1957 interview that the reason why he keeps the title as the same as the book title is, “the three words, flower, drum, and song, are all intriguing, and their juxtaposition is very attractive, yes.” (*FDS* DVD).

gaps via the carnivalesque festivity of *Flower Drum Song*, a cinematic ritual of dance, song, and music. On the obverse level, the musical performance of the film obviously celebrates Asian bodies as successfully assimilated and naturalized in the U.S. On the deeper level, it signifies a carnivalesque ritual to recuperate, appease, or repress their traumatic experience and memory of symbolic castration in a ceremonial fashion,⁴⁵ a pseudo-religious way of renewing a collective consciousness in a new time-space.

In reality, the surrealistic space of 60s San Francisco Chinatown as the primary locale of *Flower Drum Song* bears witness to the artificial as well as quasi-ritualistic reality of neoliberal American life. Christopher Isherwood, a British American novelist, compares the unlikely world of American daily life to the motel room: “American motels are unreal!...They are deliberately designed to be unreal...The Europeans hate us because we’ve retired to live inside our advertisements, like hermits going into caves to contemplate” (*Welcome* 15). The comparison of American life to the motel room with regard to 1960s Chinatown may sound silly, but it is not at all considering Europeans’ experience of the Orient during the colonial era. In *Colonizing Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell points out that Europeans traveling in the Orient confused reality with its replica as they had seen in the World Exhibition held in Europe. Upon experiencing the Orient indirectly in Europe, they began to fantasize about it and went out to see it for themselves. He observes, “the so-called real world ‘outside’ is something experienced and grasped only as a series of further representations, an extended exhibition” (29).

Confounded by what they saw in the Orient different from the imaginary real in Europe,

⁴⁵ However, it also becomes the very cause of the return of the repressed. In *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin introduces what he calls “carnival” as a subversive trope of the return of the repressed that regular conventions are broken or reversed, and genuine dialogue becomes possible. In its ritualistic festivity of carnival, the repressed distinctive individual voices are heard, flourish, and interact together. In a later work, Bakhtin illustrates the psychoanalytic function of carnival as follows: “At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival” (*Speech* 169).

Europeans enframed what they perceived as the Orient in reality into what they had fantasized as exhibited in Europe. Via Michel Foucault's application of disciplinary techniques to both space and individuals, Mitchell identifies the artificial re-mapping of colonial landscapes by suggesting how European colonists en-framed the Orient into the "colonial order of things." The imagined re-creation of the artificial Orient in Europe reflects the colonial nature of European spectatorship over the East, and so does the phantasmic setting of *Flower Drum Song* in the emerging neo-imperial era of the Cold War in the 1960s.

The virtual motel room-like space of 50s San Francisco Chinatown conforms to the neoliberal order of things whereby American spectators project their neocolonial desire for the ideal—namely, the assimilated and disciplined Asian body. This is exactly what David H. Hwang mentions in an interview for the 2006 DVD release of *Flower Drum Song* special edition:

One of the things I felt about the original version of *Flower Drum Song* is that it felt like a tourist's-eye-view of Chinatown. You even look at the lyrics of "Grant Avenue": "You travel there in a trolley. In a trolley up you climb." Now who's the "you" of the lyric? It would suggest somebody who's coming into Chinatown as opposed to someone who actually lives there. (*FDS DVD*)

60s San Francisco Chinatown has been there as an imagined space of the Orient that the American spectator fantasizes about to such an extent that it fits in with what they imagine as the Orient. As the racial frontier inside of the U.S., this imagined Oriental nation was suitable for the multicultural theme of "East meets West." Moreover, it meets the ideological discourse of neoliberalism which promotes the racial and cultural Other's assimilation to the American way in pursuit of the global construction of capitalist civil society. Only on one condition, however, can the transgressive Asian body become eligible for citizenship in the neoliberal order of things: the illegal status of the Asian body becomes exceptional to the body politic of white America; their illegitimate presence should be legalized at any rate. The exclusionary

contract that consists of previous anti-Asian immigration laws in defense of hegemonic whiteness must be revoked as we witnessed in realpolitik the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 passed, which enabled more Asian immigrants to enter the U.S. than ever before. The motif of ‘broken law’ is pervasive in the film, as when Sammy Fong’s mother, Madame Fong, shouts to the spectators in the wedding ceremony: “[Mei-Li] has broken the law and can be deported. The contract is not valid. *The contract is not valid.*” Her hysterical reiteration of the line takes place as soon as Mei-Li confesses in public, in a rather proud tone of voice, that her back is wet. The audience can sense that Madame Fong’s voice suddenly becomes impatient and high-pitched, yet only after she meticulously enunciates in a stable tone, “My son cannot marry a wetback.” Surprisingly, she seems surprised, not so much at the subsequent fiasco of her son’s long-awaited marriage as at Mei-Li’s being a wetback. Considering that Sammy Fong joyfully shouts, “Did you hear that, Mama?” it becomes obvious that Madame Fong’s real concern is about Mei Li being a wetback, not her son’s marriage. What she really *listens to* in a stupor is not Mei-Li saying, “I cannot marry your son,” to which she shows no noticeable response, but her saying, “My back is wet,” upon which she suddenly catches her breath, making a loud hissing sound.⁴⁶ What is really behind her impatience with Mei-Li’s illegal status? Why does she hysterically repeat, “The contract is not valid?”

Mei-Li’s confession operates as a form of testimonial ritual in itself for the production of truth, as Foucault notes: “...next to the testing rituals, next to the testimony of witness,... the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth” (59). Her confession as a manifestation of truth not only indicates her illegal status; but it also reflects what the phantasmic reality of 50s San Francisco Chinatown could no longer repress—the ideological necessity of both making Mei-Li fulfill her arranged marriage and “legitimizing” her

⁴⁶ The hissing sound that Madame Fong makes is her second one; the first one was made in the middle of Mei-Li saying, “I came into this country illegally across the Pacific Ocean.” Of course, this hissing sound is the return of the repressed.

wet back for the universal edifice of American neoliberalism. In other words, her confession is designed to produce a *staged* truth that America is nothing but the Promised Land for finding salvation in the post-apocalyptic vision of the Cold War. With no sign of fearing her deportation—she actually smiles!—Mei-Li succeeds in marrying, via her confession, Wang Ta, who also exclaims with joy, “Sir, I am happy to marry your daughter even if we are both deported.” Both Mei-Li and Wang Ta certainly know that the government cannot deport them insofar as their marriage ceremony serves as an official ritual to call the American audience—i.e., both wedding attendants in the movie and spectators in the theaters—to witness Asians become exceptional to the sovereign law of white America. Cheng posits, “Her public confession and self-indictment ironically anticipates the naturalization process, where one acquires citizenship through a rhetoric of rebirth predicated on self-renunciation” (43). Cheng’s comment on the ending scene supports well my argument that this film is a ceremonial ritual for the alien Asian bodies being reborn via the wedding ceremony full of flower, drum, and song. This wedding ceremony is equivalent to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a “carnival” as a subversive trope of the return of the repressed in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. This notion refers to a context in which regular conventions and norms are broken, overthrown, or reversed, and a genuine dialogue of anti-hegemonic truth becomes possibly articulated. In the ritualistic festivity of carnival—which can be translated as the “carnavalesque” in Bakhtin’s terms—calls the distinctive individual voices, which the hegemonic rule of regular conventions excludes, represses, or silences, are heard, flourish, and interact together. Mei-Li’s confession, “My back is wet,” could be distinctively articulated and heard to such an extent that her confession contradicts the conventional rule that illegal immigrants from Asia must be deported, and brings a radical change to the rule: they become exceptional to the rule and thus naturalized as American. Moreover, this radical change, which heralds a paradigm shift in the history of U.S.

immigration policy in the early Cold War era, could be made possible only in the context of the wedding ceremony, a carnivalesque that works as a site of resistance and subversion.

Mei-Li is not the only one making a confession to the spectators; Madame Fong, member of the most successfully Americanized Asian middle class, also does. She cries out “The contract is not valid!”—a long-repressed truth her confession discloses at the finale. This contract refers not simply to the arranged marriage between her son and Mei-Li but to the forced law that the U.S. has discriminately enacted against Asians throughout immigration history. It is the repressed truth of what the “contract” perversely signifies as referential to the consecutive anti-Asian immigration laws put into practice from the mid-19th century through the mid-20th century. David Eng suggests that those anti-Asian immigration laws gave rise to the de-sexualized and emasculated presence of Asian American males in popular culture, which Aihwa Ong calls “ethnic cleansing”. For example, the Page Act of 1875 was passed to prevent the entry of prostitutes and “Coolie” laborers from China and Japan, but it substantially reduced the number of all “Oriental” women entering the U.S., including the wives of immigrants who were already in the country. For Madame Fong, hysterically waiting for her son’s marriage, such a “contract” should be repealed to keep the Asian American community from remaining homosexual⁴⁷—a “queer [space] institutionally barred from normative (hetero)sexual reproduction, nuclear family formations, and entitlements to community” (Eng 18).

Consequently, in an immediate response to Mei-Li’s confession, “My back is wet,” Madame Fong also raises up her repressed voice and repeats “The contract is not valid.” Her outcry is tantamount to the proclamation of the “broken law,” which announces the arrival of a new event, era, and world order to uphold the post-apocalyptic vision of the post-war U.S. Both Mei-Li and

⁴⁷ In *Cold War Orientalism*, Christian Klein explains that even until the 1930s through the 1940s, Chinatown had remained bachelor societies composed largely of a single and male population. It is because “U.S. laws prevented Asian immigrants from forming families by restricting the immigration of Asian women, stripping the citizenship of American-born women who married noncitizens, and criminalizing miscegenation” (229).

Madame Fong's dialogic confessions bring forth, in a Foucauldian sense, "a *live event*, played out at the point of dialogic meeting [which] wants to be heard, understood, and 'answered' by other voices" (Friedman 38).⁴⁸ The "live event" signifies the actualization of the phantasmic vision of the U.S. as the Promised Land. Moreover, their dialogic interaction becomes the eventual wish-fulfillment of the ritual, not only realizing the double marriage concluding the "happily-ever-after" festivity of *Flower Drum Song* on the stage, but also completing U.S. nation-building as the post-apocalyptic Empire off the stage.

The Unfathomable eXcess of Hyper-sexuality

In the film, Madame Liang, the winner of the medal of excellence in her citizenship school, proudly shows off a certificate of her new citizenship in public and says: "I like to be *both* Chinese *and* American, a fine American citizen." Later in the movie, she also mentions, "We the people of the United States are entitled to the life of liberty and the pursuit of happy times." Once excluded as a particular subject with an alien identity, Chinese, she now fully becomes American exceptionally yet on one condition: becoming a CHINESE American, an American as "familiar but not quite." Only in her performative reiteration of difference—i.e., the stereotypical representation of her hybrid identity—is the particular, exotic substance of her Chinese identity fully accepted as American. The contingent and constitutive contract between the stereotyped and the spectator are thus mutually "signed and sealed" insofar as the performative reiteration of difference as the mode of stereotyping unites them as American. This is how the fundamental logic of U.S. multiculturalism perversely functions. In response to Sammy Fong's singing the number "Don't Marry Me," Mei-Li says: "There is nothing I can do.

⁴⁸ In his literary theory on dialogism, Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky as an extraordinary gift for hearing his epoch as a great dialogue and detecting the dialogic relationship among voices and their dialogic interaction (Bakhtin 90). Similarly, I see Rodgers and Hammerstein as the authors of a dialogic narrative who have an intuitive authorial power to recognize the dialogic interaction of the Cold War epoch in the public sphere of popular culture as witnessed in the dialogue between Mei-Li and Madame Fong.

The marriage contract is signed and sealed.” As one of the most Americanized Asians in the movie, Fong neither wants, nor is able, to marry her because, in light of American spectatorship, the marriage contract made between an absolute alien and an Americanized Asian is still *illegitimate*. The only way she can be a naturalized American and marry a *model* American like Wang Ta⁴⁹ is to break the unlawful contract by saying “I am a wetback” and become reborn via the carnivalesque ritual—the ceremonial site of penance, confession, and baptism.

At stake is, however, when Asian characters in *Flower Drum Song* becomes American *excessively* to an extent that whites have to vie with them for their privileged identity of “whiteness”—that is, a fetishized racial as well as cultural capital working as a symbolic sign of genuine American identity in the U.S. What if Asians hyperbolically become *whitened* beyond what their stereotype originally promises within the framework of the U.S. body politic which produces uneven relations of race? It refers to the way in which the ontological gap between Asians (the fetishized object of male spectatorship) and Americans (the male spectator) becomes so identical to each other that their hierarchical racial relation becomes obscure and even subverted. If so, does it still seem as obvious as before that the universal logic of U.S. multiculturalism relies on the performative reiteration of racial difference to sustain the hierarchical racial formation of the U.S. body politic? In the film, Linda Low appears “[embodying] a fantasmatic promise of *substitutive* whiteness and exoticism” (Cheng 46) as the sublime object of beauty. Whiteness here refers to the *color* of universal, transracial desire that alien bodies of color appropriate for “hiding a grotesque interior” (Shimizu 59) in a masochist way. It goes without saying that her grotesque interior bears upon the particular identity as an abject subject, reminding the spectator of the stereotyped image of Asian femme fatales as

⁴⁹ David Henry Hwang talks in the special feature of 2006 *Flower Drum Song* DVD special edition, Wang Ta played by James Shigeta is “a sexy and compelling romantic lead...as a [masculine] role model” that people from all races can adore. In addition, considering that he is the first son of an opulent, ethical, and authentic Asian family as well as a college graduate, Wang Ta is nothing but a model minority.

hyper-sexualized and vampish. In fact, her narcissistic desire for both whiteness and “enjoying being a girl” undermines the essential structure of the symbolic order of U.S. multiculturalism.

Linda Low’s narcissistic identification with white spectatorship is quite disruptive and subversive even if it implies the imagined completion of the universal totality of the multicultural U.S.—the Empire of capitalist democracy, of *one for all, all for one*.

Produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein, the most famous Broadway musical songwriters in American history, *Flower Drum Song* features Americans’ stereotypical imagination of Oriental culture in capitalist multiculturalism. Its cinematic reification of 50s San Francisco Chinatown thus stands for the commercial reproduction of the Orient in a vulgar form, a kitschy commodity that captures the public fancy of the Orient in the 50s. In other words, the commercial success and popularity of the musical is attributed to the American spectator’s voyeuristic consumption of Oriental culture. Linda Low is the central character in the film who most reifies the kitschy form of the Orient through her hypersexual performance. She shows up as a femme fatale whose beauty represents a sexually-liberated Asian woman in neoliberal America. Her sensual and voluptuous bodily performance even looks to be an uncanny double of white female sexuality. She seems not only hypersexual and narcissistic but also self-sufficient enough to “enjoy being a girl” for the entire world to see. In front of a three-way mirror, she sings her famous number, “I Enjoy Being a Girl,”⁵⁰ wearing nothing but a white bath towel: “I’m strictly a female, female...” This three-way mirror sequence bears witness to the voyeuristic gaze of the American spectator as laid upon her glamorous body when she models a gown, a cocktail dress, a bikini, and a towel. Her performance as “a long-legged dame”⁵¹ not only lets her enjoy being a girl but also turns her into a color-neutral object of trans-racial desire. Her identity as what

⁵⁰ Its lyric manifests Low’s narcissistic characteristic, which begins with “I’m a girl, and by me that’s only great! /...I’m strictly a female, female / And my future I hope will be / In the home of a brave and free male / Who’ll enjoy being a guy having a girl... like... me.”

⁵¹ Low is introduced as a long-legged dame to the spectators in Sammy Fong’s night club Celestial Garden.

Palumbo-Liu calls “quasi-whiteness” becomes the obvious gesture of erasing racial difference, disclosing “anxiety over the actualization of multiracialization” (110) in American spectatorship. Whereas Mei-Li is a toned-down version of the lotus blossom with her flat chest and short legs, Linda Low is a hyperbolic version of the dragon lady, the fatal power of seduction clad in whiteness.

Anne Cheng asserts that Linda Low’s curvy body becomes “a multiple and infinitely reproducible body” (53) in front of the three-way mirror. Her body clad in absolute whiteness, as she states, not only identifies her with an idealized white woman but also refers to an impossible body of extravagant physical beauty promising to erase “all signs of castration and all signs of racial difference” (55). With the power of seduction, Linda Low becomes the ideal incarnation of sublime images of feminine sexuality. Her hybrid but transparent identity as ‘Asian white’ becomes more precise when she wears the traditional Chinese dress, *Chi-Pao*, and acts Chinese: her clumsy and fumbling performance as a Chinese lady almost ruins Wang Ta’s college graduation party (Cheng 46). Thus, Cheng recognizes Linda Low as an impossible subject of the “lack of lack” that her “beauty is the fulfillment of a promise—a promise of fullness itself” (55). Simultaneously, Linda Low’s absolute beauty also functions as the threat of interracial relations, complicating stereotypes of racial identities. Her absolute identification with mastery of female beauty, ironically, manifests her remoteness from the dominant norm of beauty, which generally refers to white female beauty. It is because her hyper-sexuality exceeds ideological subjection in terms of the categorized positions of race and sexuality, and that excessiveness is her pleasure and source of self-identification. In other words, rather than simply being a girl, she pervertedly transforms herself into, as Cheng puts it, “the abject state of being a [universal] girl as celebrated materiality” (57).

Linda Low’s performance as the “dragon lady” clad in whiteness obfuscates stereotypical norms of racial identities. Given her symbolic identity as naturalized American, Linda Low’s re-

appropriation of the stereotype brings forth uncertainty since her being “a universal girl”—that is, white woman—is hyperbolic and extravagant per se. Her performance as such somehow remains unfathomable in that regard, for it is beyond the limits of her gender and racial identity, her excessive racial sexuality not quite fitting into the heterosexual family ideology of white-dominant civil society. In a similar vein, Josephine Lee contends that stereotype is unable to “account fully for the body of the Other, and a parodying of the stereotype makes obvious its inability to contain the excesses of the [Asian] body...[which] becomes noticeably extravagant and hyperbolic” (*PAA* 30). The cultural assumption of Asian gender and sexuality cannot fully and properly contain and symbolize the excess of her sexuality. It is mainly because Linda Low’s racialized/gendered body not only infringes on the universal/normalized sexuality, which has exclusively belonged to white Americans, but also attempts to be identified with it. Then, how can the disciplinary gaze of the American spectator cope with such an unfathomable X, or the excessive meaning, of Linda Low’s transgressive racial sexuality?

In fact, the unfathomable signification, or excessive meaning, of Linda Low’s bodily performance which disrupts the established norms is subject to discipline and punishment in light of American spectatorship. When her true identity as exotic dancer becomes exposed, Linda Low gets humiliated—namely, punished—by the Wang family as well as the spectators, for being seductive, lying, and frivolous. Her hyperbolic sexuality becomes normalized this way insofar as she chooses to be entrapped in heterosexual monogamy after all. What is at stake lies in not so much that she excessively performs the cultural codes of Asian stereotype by her own will, such as the dragon lady, as that those codes are performing her (Cheng 58). In other words, even though Linda Low’s unfathomable sexuality originates from her individual will, the very will is dictated and constituted by the performative context of what Cheng calls “American idealism” by “participating in the long tradition of...making America by making music” (52). When arguing this, Cheng adopts Judith Butler’s differentiation between performativity and

performance. The former refers to “the reiteration of norms that precede, constrain, and exceed the performer,” and the latter is based on the performer’s “will and agency” (57). Butler explains the relationship between the performing subject and its historical context that produces it as performativity in that subjectivity emerges via the constitutive inscription of the performative context in its own reiterated performance. Namely, the historical context of accumulative ideologies always already dictates the subject’s performance and constitutes its subjectivity according to the discursive performance.

In this framework, Linda Low becomes punished and normalized due to the way in which she becomes an unethical citizen subject whose hypersexual whiteness move beyond the limits of race and gender boundaries that the disciplinary performative of American spectatorship perversely dictates. The contradictory spectatorship that desires an unfathomable X of sexuality and hysterically negates it explains the libidinal as well as capitalist logic of neoliberal multiculturalism. American capitalist multiculturalism requires ethnicities (cultures, sexualities, nationalities, geographies, and bodies) as sellable commodities in the neoliberal marketplace in terms of, as Žižek puts it, the “radical de-politicization of the sphere of the economy” (*Ticklish* 353). On the other, it accompanies disciplinary measures to maintain its democratic civil order through both penalization of non-civility and protection of ethical substances in radical efforts to preserve diversities, differences, and multiplicities of ethnicities. In a similar vein, Linda Low’s hypersexual performance winds up repressed back as fit for the general lesson of the film in the disciplinary spectatorship of white America which achieves the harmonious containment of multicultural particulars. Both Linda Low and Fong finally rejoice in pursuit of a monogamous heterosexual domestic life even though their coupling lacks “a certain essential moral and social grace: both are comically vulgar and too obviously materially driven and aggressively acquisitive” (Palumbo-Liu 165). In marriage, nonetheless, Linda Low stops excessively enjoying being a girl by going back to where she ethnically belongs and gives up on

her excessive enjoyment of being what Cheng describes as a “fantasmatic interracial threat” (39).

Whiteness as Phallic Modernity

In *Flower Drum Song*, the epistemology of being white is not limited to the visible mark of a privileged race, but it is similar to how the number zero works in the numeral system, the name of what remains nameless and unnamable (Laclau 68). In “Identity and Hegemony,” Ernesto Laclau writes that the zero always appears in the guise of a one, of a (some)thing,” and thus the name ‘zero’ is nothing but the trope of the zero. It is always considered and called a one even though it is actually nameless in itself. Thus, Laclau characterizes its function in the numeral system as follows: firstly, a systemic totality cannot be constituted without including something radically heterogeneous; this something has to somehow be always represented as a systemic failure; and, finally, its representation still remains not representable within the system unless it exists only through “topological substitution” (Laclau 68). That is to say, the zero is always already in the system even if it is only (in)visible as substitutive forms, and the whole numeric system has recourse to it for the sake of its totality.

If we remember that the Lacanian Real is the name for the systemic failure of the Symbolic in achieving its own full consistency, the zero is equivalent to the Real as the potential locus of a symbolic failure in maintaining the totality of the numeral system. No number can be conceptualized without presuming the a priori condition of the zero. Laclau compares this pervasive but not-quite-visible function of the zero to “the status of a suturing *tropos*” (68). In the same vein, a hegemonic system always already contains the antagonistic presence of the Real paradoxically as both essential and subversive, for it potentially disrupts the former’s signification system through substitution, displacement, and slippage. In the cinematic simulacrum of the familiar-but-not-quite space of a 1950s San Francisco Chinatown, the racial

signification of whiteness functions the same as do both the zero and the Real. Let us look at the ways in which the white race appears in the musical film. Except for a few white spectators *enjoying* multicultural extravaganzas of Asian bodies, such as the dance number “Gliding Through my Memoree,” sporadically sitting at Sammy Fong’s Celestial Garden, only one white performer appears in the entire film: a thief who holds up Wang Chi-Yang coming home from the bank. Cheng sees this scene as the moment of transgression marked as the white world’s entry into Asian America: “The boundary separating America and Asian America is...underscored, where the only crossing imaginable is one of theft and transgression” (49). It is interesting to note that the entire film underrepresents the racial as well as symbolic image of *must-be-pervasive* whiteness except for the white scoundrel threatening the Chinese patriarch by pointing his figure-gun point at him behind the back. As Cheng observes, this obviously indicates a moment where white America violently trespasses on Asian America. I develop further that the white thief functions as the return of the repressed which disrupts the symbolic space of Asian America when Wang Chi-Yang crosses the racial/cultural line between Asia and America. The symbolic agency of the thief, I would argue, represents the *substitutive* form of the bank with a high-tech security system. As part of the Federal Reserve Bank of white America, this local bank signifies the suturing as well as splitting threshold between the Oriental and the Modern nation: that is, the trope of American capitalist modernity in which whites have the lion’s share.

In the film, the bank works as the Lacanian Real or the zero, as both essential and subversive to the ideological consistency of the ruling system: that is, an ambivalent being of both presence and non-presence. The bank, on the one hand, violates the privacy and property of the backward and vulnerable Oriental space, 50s San Francisco Chinatown, and, on the other, preserves it by securing it in the hegemonic system of American capitalism. When the *modernized* subject, Madame Liang, keeps asking him to deposit his money in the bank, not in a chest under his

Oriental decorated bed, the patriarch Wang Chi-Yang grumbles at her: “Has no man privacy even in his own bedroom?” It is easily recognizable that this film stages Chinatown as a backward space of authentic Oriental garden in the face of hegemonic Western modernity and warns it to give way to its capitalist system in a disciplinary and punitive manner. When Wang Chi-Yang asks in the bank, “What happens to those assets if you should fail?” the bank manager gets insulted and responds in a barely repressed tone of voice: “Fail? Did you say fail?” Frowning with displeasure, Madame Liang also admonishes him: “Must you insult the bank? They have not even accepted [your money] as yet.” After his hilarious blunder (he pushes the automatic security buzzer, panicking the entire bank), Wang Chi-Yang finally concedes to the reliability of the bank system: “My congratulations. This is indeed an excellent system.”

As the symbol of American capitalist modernity, the bank functions as the symbolic law of white America. The robbery scene in the movie implies that under the protection of the law, Chinatown can be safe, but once outside of its protection, the backward space becomes an abject property *taken for granted* with impunity. The white thief robs Wang Chi-Yang of his money in broad daylight in front of his own house, an incident that changes his mind regarding depositing his money in the bank. As Madame Liang regards American citizenship as the privileged right to “the life of liberty and the pursuit of happy times,” this film is a symbolic dedication to and celebration of the neoliberal life of capitalist modernity. Given that, it is certain that the antagonistic appearance of the white thief in such a life seems paradoxical, inconsistent, and even unfathomable. As the trope of the zero or the Real, his violating presence implies, on a theoretical level, the traumatic failure of the Symbolic—that is, the ideological space of *Flower Drum Song*—of achieving its systemic consistency while he is still the personification of American capitalist system. In other words, the bank stands for the Janus-faced dimension of the Law of the Symbolic as the foundation of American capitalism, whereby the thief functions as its draconian agent, robbing (disciplining and castrating) the Oriental

patriarch. Despite his brief appearance in the film, the white thief operates as the “tropological” substitution of the Real or the zero which not only subverts but also sutures the symbolic texture of the Oriental nation, giving way to American modernity.

The uncanny combination of both bank and white thief, in fact, refers to the Lacanian phallus, the trope of the Master-Signifier as the most sublime object of desire which works in a manner in which “the Linda Lowest, most vulgar function of urination passes into the most sublime function of procreation” (*Sublime* 223). If the white-controlled bank represents the Law of the Symbolic to sustain the ideological reality of U.S. neoliberal capitalism, the white thief refers to the Real which remains unfathomable and inconsistent, so that it only appears in the guise of substitutive forms as a disciplinary/punitive agency. Both bank and white thief thus serve as the foundations of the American capitalist system in the film, engendering the pervasive as well as nameless power of whiteness—the essential embodiment of American modernity. As a result, whiteness perversely operates as the phallus, the most sublime object of desire to turn Asians into a modernized citizen subject. Its racial and cultural authority always already haunts the entire cinematic space of the Asian nation with flower, drum, song in substitutive, disguised, and displaced forms, such as Madame Liang’s acquiring citizenship, Linda Low’s enjoying being a girl, and Wang Chi-Yang’s opening a bank account. All of these different forms take place in *Flower Drum Song* to vindicate the legitimate supremacy of the U.S.-led cultural and political economy and uphold the rise of neoliberal American Empire during the Cold War era.

Toward the Zero-Institution

The subversive nature of Linda Low’s sexuality lies in the potential to disrupt the Law of the Symbolic sustaining the ideological edifice of neoliberal U.S. multiculturalism. This unfathomable X of her sexuality represents something that traumatizes the voyeuristic gaze of the American spectator. For example, she has to remain within the parameter of the

conservative gender and racial boundaries that American society sets up, however transgressive her sexuality is. Nevertheless, the movie implicitly suggests the way in which her performance becomes so transgressive that her racial and gender identities become fully identified with those of white women. This can confuse the invasive gaze of white male spectatorship to such an extent that it cannot recognize her in her racial and gender stereotypes. This causes the American spectator not to be able to preserve his voyeuristic desire to see the exotic spectacle of the Other in the gendered tropes of race, and this displaces and attenuates his racial and gender authority of whiteness. The racial authority in question can lead to the dissolution of unnatural social links which rely on unwritten rules, such as political correctness, to keep the multicultural universe in peace. Linda Low's excessive enjoyment of being white is equivalent to an act of breaking the promise that the stereotype, as the articulation of racial fixity, makes to both Asian Americans and white Americans.

Žižek considers that, in modern society, there are two dimensions of the law: the neutral symbolic law of disciplinary, punitive, and jurisdictional practices, and its "superego supplement of obscene unwritten rules" (*Plague* 11). The second one is an implicit promise and contract among members of civil society to sustain its ideological edifice in the substitutive, pseudo-religious forms of ethics, morality, civility and even political correctness. The reason why those rules are *obscene* is that they remain in effect only in the forms of superego pleasure that the disciplinary practice of the written law perversely enjoys. In the public sphere, the determination of proper ways of speaking, behaving, and thinking in light of political correctness has recourse to individuals' subjective judgments, rather than the written law. These unwritten rules or codes of behavior thus are found so supplemental but efficient that they "restrain the field of choice by prohibiting the possibilities allowed for—guaranteed by—the public law" (*Plague* 28). As a result, the so-called common rule is crucial to such an ideological

belief that, in civil society, we share the same value or consciousness in addition to the disciplinary, punitive practices of the symbolic, written law.

In modern society, the nation-state emerges with the dissolution of social links grounded in direct family or traditional symbolic matrixes: as Žižek puts it, “With the onslaught of modernization, social institutions were less and less grounded in naturalized tradition and more and more experienced as a matter of contract” (“Class Struggle” 114). The radical form of the nation-state is the so-called zero-institution, which enables all members of different communities to experience themselves as members of the same community. In the unifying system of the zero-institution, the significance of unwritten rules cannot but increase. They have double dimensions in themselves. On the one hand, they differentiate particular substances from one another through the performative reiteration of differences as a mode of stereotyping (the Asian American, the American; the white, and the people of color, etc.). They, on the other hand, unite them through an imagined identification as a means of unifying them under the same rubric, such as American, to consolidate internal differences into a political system of unity—for instance, nationalism. Linda Low’s racial identification with whites via her excessive sexuality is in fact breaking the unwritten contract that dictates ethnic subjects to remain familiar but not quite to one another, which is the very foundation of neoliberal U.S. multiculturalism.

While gazing at her curvy body clad in whiteness, American spectators might question Linda Low, Are you white? In reality, the answer is both *yes* and *no* even considering that Nancy Kwan, who plays Linda Low in the film, is actually half-Chinese and half-Scottish.⁵² This question eventually returns to the white spectators who watch her hypersexual body clad in whiteness that dismantles the racial and gender framework of the U.S. body politic—namely, a

⁵² See the endnote 4 regarding the hybrid identity of Nancy Kwan playing Linda Low in the film.

paradoxical body that is not only attractive but also transgressive. No matter how sadistically they desire her as a color-neutral, masochist, universal girl, her answer is supposed to be “no” at any cost and thus, to be politically correct. This question is fundamentally an empty gesture which is meant to be rejected in the first place. She marries Sammy Fong after all and goes back to where she *naturally* belongs, only to be racially as well as sexually contained in the 1960s San Francisco Chinatown, the stereotypical turf of Asian America. Mei-Li chooses to marry Wang Ta for her survival as a naturalized citizen subject in the U.S. and thus becomes reborn as American. For this, she has to go through a ceremonial ritual to make confession and purify her wetback. On the contrary, Linda Low regards her marriage as “social security” as she says in the film. It refers to an insurance policy for her future life, like the “sweet Sunday”⁵³ that she always dreams about, but also indicates her being expelled from where she previously belonged, as exotic dancer, an unethical citizen subject. Her marriage rescues her from breaking the unwritten rule, giving up on her excessive, obscene enjoyment of being a universal girl for *everybody*. In *Flower Drum Song*, consequently, marriage unites all these different but familiar subjects, Asian Americans, and put them under the unifying rubric “American,” just like the way the zero-institution unifies heterogeneous social substances. Moreover, this universal unification of multiple cultures and different subjects in the heterogeneous conglomeration of “Chop-Suey” is the primordial desire of the U.S., in the context of the Cold War, for its nation-building as the zero-institution—the pure form of universal Empire.

⁵³ “Sweet Sunday” is part of the number “Sunday” Sammy Fong and Linda Low sing together, fantasizing their imaginary married life.

Chapter 3

Traumatic Diversities:

On the Controversy over Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*

Published in 1997, *Blu's Hanging* is Lois-Ann Yamanaka's third work following her 1996 debut novel *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* and 1993 poetry collection *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*. She has been known for writing many critically acclaimed works, which deal with controversial ethnic issues in the local culture of Hawai'i. In 1998, *The Los Angeles Times* thus wrote, "[Yamanaka] is known for her brutally honest portrayal of the islands' locals⁵⁴, exposing in revealing detail the prejudices, idiosyncrasies and insecurities of her mostly Asian American characters" (Seo). In 1998 the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) awarded Yamanaka its Fiction Award for her *Blu's Hanging*, only to have this award protested. What was hotly debated was the representation of Filipino American characters in the novel—

⁵⁴The term "local" has a distinctive implication in the Hawaiian context in opposition to the ideological narrative of the U.S. as a nation of immigrants. Maria Christine Zamora argues, "A powerful yet veiled underside exists to this local narrative of identity—a denial of the political status of indigenous peoples (Native Hawaiians)" (86). This is also used to differentiate the indigenous from Asian settlers in terms of their different ethnicities along with their different social hierarchy in the colonial context of Hawaii. Zamora thus suggests, "Hawaii is...a hotbed of the divisible colonial legacy of a distinct racial/ethnic power structure" (86). Erin Suzuki defines the "local" as rather flexible and unstable than strictly referring to the indigenous—that is, "an ambivalent, unstable identity marked and shaped by the material effects of colonization, immigration, and race-based class stratification" (38). In this chapter, I also use the term "local" within the framework of colonial context: the central vs. the marginal. Colonialism or cultural imperialism is working so efficiently in the era of multiculturalism as the ideal form of ideology of global capitalism that Slavoj Žižek suggests it colonizes local cultures without the colonizing Nation-State metropole. Žižek remarks that multiculturalism is "the attitude that, from a kind of empty global position, treats *each* local culture they way the colonizer treats colonized people—as 'natives' whose mores are to be carefully studied and 'respected'" ("Multiculturalism" 170).

Uncle Paulo and the Reyes sisters. *Blu's Hanging* caused the hottest debate among Asian American readers and scholars because of the way she represents her Asian American characters. They are portrayed as evil, promiscuous, and depraved, and called “Human Rats” in the novel. The association board ultimately rescinded the award due to the intensive protest of scholars and students. Augusto Espiritu, UCLA graduate student then, wrote to the AAAS board, “such characterizations are hurtful because Filipinos, particularly in Hawai‘i, have long been the target of racial slurs and jokes” (Seo).

Scholars, such as Viet Nguyen, Kandice Chuh, and Emily Russell have since written about this schismatic event insofar as it reveals how Asian American literary studies has developed as an academic and political institution. For them, this controversy shows the strategic necessity of Asian America to embrace its internal diversity and conflict for more flexible formations of Asian American subjectivities. They see the event as a disruptive eruption of contradictions long repressed in the political assemblage of heterogeneous minorities under the rubric of Asian America. In the same vein, the former AAAS president Yen Espiritu stated that this event is “symptomatic of what people were feeling, their feelings of marginalization” (Asian Week). Thus, this incident served as an alarm to call for a strategic reaffirmation of the panethnic constitution of Asian America. Asian American Studies has been put under pressure to realize common political interests crossing its heterogeneous subjects.

Others, however, focused on her Yamanaka’s aestheticism, urging readers to think of the novel as not simply a negative portrayal of Filipinos. Sue-Im Lee, Mark Chiang, and Floyd Cheung have argued that her works are fictional and that Yamanaka

herself does not necessarily hold the same views as her narrator.⁵⁵ They called for critics to “break away from a binary division of the ideological and the aesthetic” (Cheung 311) that can result in artistic censorship. Similarly, Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi observe, “in much criticism, the locations of Asian American literature were usually conceived in terms of geography, ethnicity, sociology, and national history,” rather than “textual strategies, which include the formal structure of a text” (4-5). Those scholars laid more stress on questions of censorship and artistic license than to the debate on racism and sexism in her works.

There is yet another side to this debate that is expressed by those living in Hawaii, who are committed to the formation of local identity against the cultural imperialism of the mainland. *Blu's Hanging* ends with the protagonist Ivah leaving her family as well as her home island Moloka'i. Erin Suzuki considers this ending as glossing over local Hawaiians' long efforts to set up a claim to the Islands: “the critics who defended the novel on ‘aesthetic’ grounds perform an erasure of the Filipino subject that mirrors the elision of their own subjectivity from a dominant, ‘mainland’ discourse” (50). Candace Fujikane shares Suzuki's stance as well. She reads Ivah's departure as escaping poverty and alienation which “offers no solution” (A-9-11), for the Filipino Reyes sisters, the daily victims of Uncle Paulo's sexual violence, remain on Moloka'i. This, she implies, signifies Ivah's giving up on responsibility for local community and her being co-opted by the mainland discourse of cultural imperialism.

⁵⁵Right after Yamanaka's award rescinded, Wing Tek Lum and David Mura organized a letter-writing campaign among fellow Asian American writers in opposition to what they perceived as artistic censorship. After sending out packets of information chronicling the controversy, they received 82 responses of support from, to name a few, Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Shawn Wong, and Jessica Hagedorn (Seo).

For this reason, Fujikane insists that her attack on Yamanaka's works does not aim to censor them but to convince the AAAS that the novel is "perceived as encouraging racial divisions and perpetuating stereotypes" (Seo) on multiple levels.

Above all, the reason why Fujikane is so critical about *Blu's Hanging* is concerned with local Hawaiians' sensitive memory of being exploited both physically and mentally. In particular, Filipinos had to endure the persistent stereotype that they are sexually predatory, a colonial stereotype that dates from the plantations in Hawai'i and the farms on the Mainland ("Books" B4). Given this anti-colonial point of view, it is difficult to imagine that Yamanaka's novel brought a lot of hurt and dismay to local Hawaiians, for betraying her ethnic fidelity to where she belongs. In this regard, Fujikane lashed out at those sympathizing with Yamanaka's aestheticism: "What I find most deeply troubling is that people who defend the book continue to tell local Filipino and non-Filipino critics that if they are offended by Yamanaka's work, they do not know how to grasp the complexity of literature" (Agaton). This patronizing attitude, as she would say, possibly conveys a failure of doing justice to the issue of marginalization of Filipinos in the ongoing history of colonialism in Hawai'i.

Only To Be Either Model Or Peril?

Fujikane's criticism on *Blu's Hanging* is at its fundamental level concerned with the identity politics of Asian Hawaiians whose subject formation remains ambiguous between colonial and settler. In "Foregrounding Native Nationalism," she suggests that Asian settlers in Hawai'i have strategically refashioned their identity as colonized. Asian immigrants and their descent tend to see themselves as subject to the colonial

practice of the mainland's corporate capitalism, equating their identity with that of the indigenous. Fujikane continues that this refashioning of their identity allowed them to take advantage of the indigenous' nativist movement to demand a claim for Hawai'i as nation legitimate; moreover, this leads them to neglect, as she puts it, "the internal differences and unequal hierarchies of incommensurable Hawaiian populations." Asian Americans' cultural nationalism, therefore, paradoxically happened to "deny the conditions of settler colonialism in Hawai'i and to dismiss the indigenous' anti-colonial struggles as essentialist and fated to fail" (88). Fujikane describes it as an "identity theft" in that they appropriate the indigenous' colonial subjectivity for their political autonomy and depreciate the latter's nativist movement as "the retrogressive nature of nationalism" (88).

In the same vein, Fujikane even denounces scholars who are generally in favor of diasporic identity as a strategic alternative to national identity in the postmodern era of globalization. In particular, she attacks Arjun Appadurai who praises the "global formulation of [economico-cultural] deterritorialization" which she thinks turns the U.S. into a neoliberal "free-trade zone" (86). Appadurai upholds the postmodern condition of globalization in repudiation of white racism by defining the U.S. as a nation of immigrants, yet Fujikane argues that it not only privileges diasporic subjects over the indigenous but also neglects the latter's anti-colonial struggles. She regards Asian settlers' anti-colonial discourse as a quasi-colonial practice that alienates the indigenous, for it consolidates their "uniform nationalist subject that is purchased at the expense of articulations of gender or class or queer differences" (91).

Moreover, Fujikane opposes trendy scholars who adopt deconstructionist tropes of difference, displacement, and plurality as alternatives to identity politics, such as Kandice Chuh. In her *Imagine Otherwise*, Chuh introduces a so-called “subjectless subject” to challenge the staid formation of Asian American identity as fixed, centralizing, and determined—a post-structuralist discourse that relies on difference as the basis of unification. Her notion of “subjectless-ness” sounds effective in the postmodern position of cosmopolitan identity and neoliberal citizenship; nonetheless, it can be easily appropriated for the ideological as well as material perpetuation of colonial system in the anti-nationalist paradigm of neoliberal multiculturalism, for it obscures rigorous colonial conditions of the local.

Fujikane’s criticism on Asian American identity politics is founded on the fact that their diasporic as well as settler identity is privileged as an alternative to the colonial. She thinks that their anti-nationalist practice that favors diasporic experience and cosmopolitan subjectivity results in aestheticizing colonial Hawai‘i as the “Paradise of the Pacific,” a virgin soil that needs the protection of Western civilization (Morrow). Fujikane states:

[Taking] native nationalism as a search for a pristine past, nostalgia for lost origins, or an appeal to unreconstructed nativist authenticity cannot attend to the complex politics of particular nationalist claims at specific moments in time nor to the role of the state in denying Native lands and identity. (“Foregrounding” 88)

Asian Americans have struggled to build their identity as a site of resistance against white racism, and they have benefited from America’s neoliberal politics for democratic

citizenship and consumer culture. In other words, Asian Americans' political position is ambivalent: on the one hand, their settler identity contributed to what Frank H. Wu calls the "perpetual foreigners syndrome." On the other, it became co-opted by American nationalism, which is congenial to colonial discourse that excludes and depreciates native nationalism as obsolete and preposterous. As Inderpal Grewal says, the power of American nationalism lies in its governmental technologies to exploit the precarious state of Asian immigrants and refugees, and render them provisional national subjects (8). The identity of Asian Americans, as a result, is double-edged: one side is the yellow peril or the permanent alien and the other is the model minority.

Viet T. Nguyen locates this inconsistency in the difference of political interests between Asian American creative writers and intellectuals. Asian American identity has been defined as either a bad subject of resistance or a good one of the model minority. Nguyen observes that Asian American creative writers have showed a greater range of flexibility, multiplicity, and ambivalence in their writings; on the contrary, Asian American literary critics simply repeat an imagined opposition between "resistance and accommodation," or "bad" and "good." Becoming a bad subject means opposing a white-privileged racial hierarchy, and being a good one means acquiescence to a status quo.. The problem is exacerbated when the good model minority tries to refashion his or her identity as oppositional for the sake of seeming politically salient. The resulting contradiction in identity formation or gap causes what Nguyen calls a "crisis of representation"; moreover, the idealization and misrecognition of Asian American identity as such ultimately transforms itself into a racial commodity that results in "an unintentional repetition of ideological domination" (145).

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As Mark Chiang expressed, despite the long debates about Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging*, the lesson seems unclear (17). People like Rose Churma are confused as to who is right and who is wrong, yet the problem is not just about the division in the Asian American community of Hawai‘i. Rather, the matter concerns sincerity and fidelity in terms of the extent to which Asian Americans belong to Hawai‘i. It is not so sure that there could be an ‘ethnic’ unity possible among naturalized natives in Hawai‘i who have assimilated into a “native nationalism” despite their settler identity. The internal differences of subjective positions in the collective rubric of Asian American identity in the Hawaiian context are inexorably entangled with the problem of class,

creating multiple-layered conflicts and antagonisms among the Hawaiian population as a whole. About the controversy in Asian American Studies, Chiang diagnoses that its division is owing to its development as an institutional field to achieve greater autonomy and greater legitimacy in academia, which distanced it from the community (29). I suggest that the debate over the award cancellation indicates the way in which Asian American identity politics should become more amenable and flexible for a greater range of different subject positions in recognizing and representing them. If we ask why people got so angry about the negative portrayals of Filipinos in Hawai'i, the answer would be not simply that they are just described as evil against universal humanity; a more in-depth one would be that they have consistently been stereotyped as such both in reality and in fiction.

It is certain that the focus of the controversy lies not simply on whether the author is racist or not but on how Asian Americans in Hawai'i are positioned in the complicate power dynamic between oppositional Hawaiian identity and cosmopolitan diasporic one within the larger framework of the pan-ethnic identity of Asian America. And it becomes more obvious when it comes to the denouncement of Fujikane, Hawaiian native Asian American scholar, against Appadurai, one of the representative Asian American scholars on diasporic studies, and this is part of what bear witness to the irreducibly complex power dynamic among different subject positions within the collective rubric of Asian American identity. On a fundamental level, the accusation against Yamanaka's work concerns distrust and division among Asian Americans regarding how they should claim their identity as Hawaiian. How much can we agree on Fujikane's accusation of Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* for what she calls the "settler

investment” (91) that Asian Americans achieve their political interests at the expense of the indigenous Hawaiian’s coloniality? How true is it that the revisionist idea of Asian American panethnic identity nothing but patronizes the colonial condition of the indigenous? As Fujikane points out, is it a structural problem that Hawaiians’ demand for equality and belongingness inscribes its impossibility in itself (“Foregrounding” 93) as long as the settler investment remains at odds with native nationalism? From now on, this paper attends to these tough questions to better an understanding of the nature of the controversy that *Blu’s Hanging* brought about.

Speaking Pidgin as Anti-Colonial Gesture

Blu’s Hanging is not the only work of Yamanaka that has aroused much public debate. Even though her previous works caused controversies more or less, however, the ways each of her works drew public attention have been diverse and even contradictory to one another. Yamanaka’s first poetry collection, *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*, was written in pidgin and awarded the Pushcart Prize in 1993 and the AAAS’ Fiction Award in 1994. As a multilingual combination of English, Hawaiian, and Asian languages, pidgin has developed out of necessity for haole (Caucasian) planters and plantation workers from Japan, the Philippines, China, Portugal and Korea to communicate one another since the late nineteenth century. Ronald Takaki, born and grown up in Hawai‘i, states that pidgin “enabled people from different countries to communicate with each other and thus helped them create a new identity associated with Hawai‘i” (264).

As a language for white planters to manage immigrant laborers of multicultural background, pidgin carries negative connotations as the language of indentured labor, social discrimination, and cultural alienation. So it has long been considered “an educational and often a social hindrance” (Reinecke 211, 214). Despite its essential link to the rich past of local Hawaiians and to their identity as a product of plantation life,⁵⁶ pidgin was stereotyped as the language of the ignorant or illiterate. Ironically, pidgin could have developed due to the English-only policy introduced to the Hawaiian school system since 1896. In early twentieth century, English-only instruction brought about a massive shift of language in Hawai‘i from the indigenous Polynesian language to pidgin as the primary language of multiethnic populations on the islands. As a result, this policy had the devastating effect on literacy, academic achievement, and the use of Standard English among Native Hawaiians (Benham 194). Despite the most commonly used language since the legislation, pidgin has not been welcome in the public space for tourist and commercial development (Reinhold). Under this circumstance, Yamanaka’s first poetry collection was not welcome to schools either, and she was “uninvited” from readings of her book (Takahama E01).

Only a few years after the mainstream press *Farrar, Straus & Giroux* published *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*, Yamanaka’s poetry began to draw fellow Hawaiians’ attention as a work revealing an essential feature of their local culture. Some readers say, “It’s almost like, because this New York publisher gave their approval, now it’s all OK. We’re strange in that respect” (Takahama E01). Valerie

⁵⁶Maria Christine Zamora suggests, Yamanaka’s pidgin is “a poetic ‘recreolization’ of English, a poly-lingual language of the local and the minor” in the colonial context of Hawaii (109).

Takahama, local journalist, catches an irony embedded in this belated popularity of Yamanaka's work by quoting the author: "I was uninvited to schools, my book was banned at certain schools, [and] teachers couldn't use the work. I found it really sad, because when children did get a hold of the book, it rang so true to their experience" (E01). It is even more remarkable that her works had already been popular in the mainland despite the controversy around her works. Some critics even describe Yamanaka as the victim of her own success, because her book was published by a major publishing house in the mainland, and she received quite favorable reviews nationwide (James).

Until recently, Hawaiians had denied her using pidgin, despite it being so true to their underrepresented condition, conforming to the universal policy of the mainland to rid Hawaiian culture of pidgin. Given their initial reaction to Yamanaka's using pidgin in her works, local Hawaiians' aspiration for their own distinctive identity against the mainland seems inconsistent. In other words, the Hawaiian's pursuit of cultural and political autonomy against the mainland's cultural imperialism looks already compromised by the neoliberal discourse of the mainland that the U.S. is a land of opportunity for all (legal) immigrants. Of course, such a discourse that privileges a diasporic identity over a native one characterizes American nationalism that attempts to give a hegemonic normality to the uneven development and unequal relations of race.

Contrary to the prevailing perception that Hawai'i is a model of harmonious ethnic relations, it has a long history of colonial legacies, such as the privatization of native land, labor exploitation and plantation economy, and the steady weakening of Native Hawaiian rule under the guise of civilization mission. Josephine Lee describes

the islands as a contradictory space where “social stratification...in terms of income level, land ownership, access to education, and political representation continue to belie its reputation as a multicultural paradise” (121). Annexed in 1898 as the U.S.’ territorial colony, Hawai‘i was known as the “ultimate racial laboratory” where “the rise of a more progressive and liberal view of race relations...took hold of the popular imagination” in the 1920s (“AAI” 128). Within this framework, Lee contends that a more cultural and ethnic view of difference emerged during the course of colonial assimilation and immigrant labor displacement from Asia. Moreover, the U.S.’ victory over totalitarian enemies during WWII helped legitimize her colonial domination over the islands, turning them as an “emblem of America’s new prominence as guardian of fairness, liberality, and democracy...in contrast to the cruel racism and tyranny of America’s wartime enemies” (“AAI” 129-30). That is, the popular imagination of Hawai‘i as the island of virgin paradise fundamentally originates from colonial discourse that upholds American exceptionalism to justify the colonial rule in Hawai‘i and to turn the U.S. into a multicultural utopia of democracy and freedom. Because of such hegemonic narratives of racial harmony and progress in the vision of the “new” Hawai‘i, racial tensions indelibly inscribed in its colonial history have been downplayed and repressed in contrast with racial tensions elsewhere (“AAI” 128).

Yamanaka’s use of pidgin in her works is obviously a political gesture, shaking off the cultural imperialism of the mainland by repudiating the nationally endorsed English tradition. Particularly, *Blu’s Hanging* thematically stresses pidgin as anti-colonial. For example, Ivah stubbornly insists on using pidgin in her conference with Miss Owens, haole teacher, who forces her to speak Standard English and regards

pidgin as “limited in its ability” for communication. Yet Ivah bluntly responds, “I don’t even care” (60). Her defiance of Miss Owens’ established authority (haole teacher from the mainland) manifests her determination to revolt against colonial authority by means of using pidgin, the cultural ad well as ethnic embodiment of oppositional local identity. Given that, Hawaiians’ reluctance to read Yamanaka’s works at school is exposing power struggle and internal division among them whose political positionality ambivalently lies between anti-colonial and neoliberal. The more pidgin is taken as a primordial indicator specific to the history and culture of colonial Hawai‘i, the more it is subject to negation and taboo. John E. Reinecke makes this point clearer: “the use of ‘good English,’ always a class fetish emphasized by the pedagogic mind, becomes in Hawai‘i doubly a fetish, about which play ambivalent sets of attitudes” (213).

Pidgin is considered a “primitive language” that excludes local Hawaiians from the purview of American modernity. This primitivism becomes an emblem of colonial history, memory and experience that the mainland culture attempts to eliminate and deny. The requirement of standard English in contemporary Hawaii makes pidgin a pre-modern legacy, whose use becomes antithetical to the democratic values of the U.S., such as human rights and political freedom, etc. In the same vein, the public school in Hawai‘i works as a governing tool to obscure antagonistic differences and race-based class tensions and conflicts among local Hawaiians. Josephine Lee examined the so-called College Plays published in Hawai‘i during the first half of the twentieth century. She considers them as locals’ positive response to modernization—“as successful exemplars of the possibility of cultural hybridity and social mobility” (132). According

to her, these plays evince local Hawaiians' desire to achieve the politico-economic status of whites and to break away from their backward identity.

Blu's Hanging also portrays a local desire for modernization that paradoxically supports further colonialism, which then denies local identity: a vicious cycle. In the novel, Aunt Betty, Bertram Ogata's older sister, much more favors her second daughter, Lila Beth, than her first one, Faith Ann Fukuda called Big Sis. The reason is that Lila qualifies for college on the mainland; Betty's favoritism represses aspects of her own self in favor of identification with a daughter blessed by mainland modernity. Aunt Betty disavows her local identity when she yells at Ivah for her parents' history of leprosy. After colonialism in Hawai'i began, the colonial rule of the mainland used leprosy to justify the presence of colonial authority on the Hawaiian Islands. Emily Russell quotes a white missionary from the late 19th century, "the Hawaiians are a very affable, agreeable, and lovable people, [but] their 'lack of care' has caused the spread of disease." American imperialists took advantage of this racialized disease a.k.a. "Chinese sickness" to facilitate their colonial enterprise on the pretext of civilizing such lazy, unclean, and promiscuous Hawaiians (Russell 55-6). Given this, leprosy is a traumatic name-calling for all local Hawaiians that evokes their repressed memory of being abject colonial subjects of loss and alienation: "But not your madd's useless family. Maybe *you* would keep all the stuffs. 'Cause, I swear, you three kids no mo' manners and you rude like hell....But lucky thing Lila Beth like me, yeah, Lila? You just like me. You

one good girl who going to whass right, yeah, Lila, ‘cause *you just like me*. And I always do whass right” (78)⁵⁷.

The narcissistic identification of Aunty Betty with Lila Beth ends up in a catastrophe soon after. Betty gets furious about Lila’s hickeys covered all over her body, “smacking [her] across the head and face, over and over” (86). Betty’s violent beating of Lila shows not only her disappointment, but also anxiety about her own bloodline, with a family whose body has been known as ‘scarred’ on a symbolic level: ““You[Beth] look like you get one disease all over your goddamn body. You make me sick. Your body full of disease’” (86). Through this episode in *Blu’s Hanging*, Yamanaka shows Aunty Betty’s abhorrence of local identity. While looking at Betty’s hysterical beating of Lila, moreover, it is Ivah who silently narrates, “*You just like me. You just like me*” (86). All of them are haunted by their local and abject identity even after any leprosy symptom are gone forever.

As the term “scar” symbolizes in the novel, the colonial conditions of Hawai‘i, such as perpetual economic poverty, racial discrimination, and cultural marginalization incessantly haunt behind the ideological discourse of modernization and neoliberal citizenship. The Ogata family, local working-class people, holds pidgin in use as their political “reaction to capitalistic classism” (Makino 79), disrupting the symbolic space of white-centered America. Yamanaka’s depiction of locals speaking pidgin obviously intends to portray their resistance to American nationalism co-opting the local Hawaiian

⁵⁷All citations from the novel are marked with page numbers with neither book title nor author’s name in parentheses.

identity specific to its material experience of colonialism.⁵⁸ Given this, it is nothing but ironically, if not paradoxical, that Yamanaka's pidgin-written works as the incarnation of colonial experience have been not welcome in public school in Hawai'i because of the Standard English Only policy from the mainland. Yamanaka's writing thus offers a realistic, dark portrait of the islands, the inherent obverse of the Hawaiian life that the mainstream media portrays as that of a multicultural paradise. s

Leaving Home as Negation of the Colonial Self

In *Blu's Hanging*, Ivah boldly resists the norms of the mainland culture as seen in her rejection of Standard English; however, her behavior is not always consistent in her commitment to her local identity. She is a big fan of Western movies and likes to identify with actors from the films starring Clint Eastwood, such as Mary Ann from *The Beguiled*. Even though she says, "The guy speaks such perfect English, it's disgusting" (35), it becomes one of the main reasons why she gets attracted to Mitchell Oliveira, a "Portuguese, good haole English speaker" (23). She falls in love with Jim Cameron at first sight, "the God Almightyest Handsomest Christian man" (212), who works as summer missionary in the church and speak a perfect English. Ivah's infatuation with

⁵⁸Jonathan Okamura explains the notion of "locals" specifically in Hawaii as "the shared identity of people in Hawaii, who have an appreciation of and a commitment to the island and their peoples, cultures, and ways of life, which are perceived as being threatened by external forces of development and change, e.g. tourism and foreign investment" (Okamura 174). He points out that the concept of locals is even more recognized and advanced than the one of Asian Americans in Hawaii (251). In this regard, the term "local" implicates the cultural resistance of Hawaiians based on racial diversity and hybridity against the cultural imperialism of the mainland or metropolis-centered globalization. (80) In her dissertation, Rie Makino also makes emphasis on the necessity to examine the term "locals" within the context of interracial and class relationship in Hawaii in positioning the literature by Asian Americans in Hawai'i (79).

the mainland culture by fetishizing it demonstrates her contradictory subject consciousness, which helps us better understand the ending of this novel—Ivah's leaving the family. The novel ends with Ivah leaving her family and the home island Moloka'i for the prep school Mid-Pac where "no laundry, no cooking. No Blu" (151). This ending is incongruous with her politically-informed speaking of pidgin, which symbolizes her resistance against the haole authority.

To the Ogata family in the isolated island of Moloka'i, Mid-Pac at Honolulu stands for a space to which locals' yearning toward modernity is directed—a desire for capitalistic abundance and neoliberal citizenship. In a similar vein, Blu states in the novel: "Everyone says that in Kaunakakai we're five years behind Hilo and Hilo's five years behind Honolulu, and Honolulu's five years behind the mainland" (136). The wider the cultural gap between the island and the mainland is, the bigger the Ogata children's infatuation with the mainland modernity gets. Similar to Aunty Betty, Ivah decides to go to Mid Pac to achieve the negation of her local identity. Yamanaka's narrative romanticizes Ivah's leaving the island to an extent that she leaves the family to hopefully regain the *imaginary*—that is, irretrievable—totality of an idealized heterosexual family that is currently non-existent in the poverty-ridden island. Simply put, her leaving is a gesture of promise for a better life in future when she comes back. It is equivalent to the neoliberal promise of an ideological reality that we are all born equal and can achieve the American dream like all others.

The narrative tells us that the only way to save the Ogas from the melancholic reality of colonial conditions is letting her leave for the metropolis of neoliberal capitalism. In other words, Yamanaka's narrative gives us an impression that the island

of Moloka‘i ends up nothing but a traumatic space that remains incongruous and inconsistent with the symbolic purview of Hawai‘i as a multicultural paradise in our reality today. This is especially acute in the novel’s portrayal of the maternal. On the island, a lack of motherhood is portrayed as disorderly, unethical, and perverted. The absent Mama Eleanor who sacrificed herself for her children was the only reason in the novel that they could endure their miserable life in the island, a spectre that always haunts the family to guide the motherless kids. Moreover, she is also a symbolic figure that embodies the painful history of the colonial island through her diseased body that killed her. Ivah’s leaving both family and spectral Mom is the negation of her local identity. Ivah’s leaving not only turns the island into a space of negation to escape from; but it also makes irretrievable the ideal motherhood of the absent “Mama” that Ivah has strived to substitute for. Ivah realizes that she cannot replace her Mama, an emblem of ideal motherhood from whom the Ogata children find the meaning of their life in the island. Ivah says at the end of the novel, “Leave the porch light off, Blu. The priest had um all wrong when he told us for leave um on so she find her way. Mama gotta find her way to heaven, not *home*” (260). She parts not only from her family but also from her “Mama” after all.

I see Ivah’s leaving the island in terms of identity transformation. The prep school she is flying off to in Honolulu signifies a neoliberal promise to change her ontological status from colonial to neoliberal. In this respect, Hawai‘i functions as a liminal space that arouses a desire for neoliberal modernity while the obverse of its symbolic dimension as a multicultural paradise conceals its colonial conditions. It is compared to a space that David Palumbo-Liu calls the “racial frontier” where the self

and the other encounter with each other to become an ‘American,’ a universal signifier of multiplicity, diversity, and plurality. Thus, the racial frontier is a space that creates subjectivities of racial, cultural, and geographical hybridity between Asia and America via the incessant deconstruction and transformation of existing racial and cultural boundaries. From the mainland’s perspective, those placed in the racial frontier are particular subjects who are not fully converted into neoliberals; moreover, they are inconsistent with the ideological universality of American nationalism, which undermines the closure of its hegemonic ideology.

In *Blu’s Hanging*, Yamanaka represents those subjects through “Poppy” Bertram Ogata and “Mama” Eleanor Ogata whose bodies are covered with scars, a metaphorical trace left after their leprosy had been cured. I interpret the leprous scars as what symbolizes their liminal subjectivity—neither fully colonial nor fully neoliberal. Their ‘scarred’ subjectivity does not quite fit into neoliberal subjects from the hegemonic reality of American modernity and remains the object of exclusion as the traumatic trace of U.S. colonialism in Hawai‘i. What these leprous bodies full of disease in *Blu’s Hanging* symbolizes is that the neoliberal incorporation of them into the national body of American modernity is not quite complete without leaving an indelible mark, ‘scar,’ on their transformed identity. This is, I argue, thematically relevant to the controversy over Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging*.

Naming “Asian America” in Place

On a symbolic level, the scars on the bodies of Poppy and Mama in *Blu’s Hanging* refer to a visible sign of alienation of racialized subaltern subjects in colonial

Hawai‘i. This sign functions as an official insignia for their racial, cultural, and political identity. That is, Poppy and Mama’s bodies with their leprous scars reduce their ontological being to an ideological identity formed by colonialism. Moreover, the scar also works as a spectre because, even after the original source of symptom, that is, leprosy, has been cured, the scar persists, reminding people of the disease. As the leftovers of not only leprosy but also colonial memory and experience in Hawai‘i, the scar is considered symptomatic of anxiety, trauma, and rupture in the imagined space of the multicultural paradise. In this spirit Maria Christine Zamora finds that *Blu’s Hanging* foregrounds the “contradictions involved in articulating a local self-representation, as well as an overall conceptualization of the ‘face’ of the nation” (89). In the novel, the Ogata couple’s body and its leprous scars reveals the colonial materiality of Hawai‘i, the inherent obverse of the symbolic reality of the U.S.

As an official insignia of internal dissention at the 1998 AAAS conference at Hawai‘i, the controversy over *Blu’s Hanging* can also be considered a leprous scar on the imagined ethnic body of Asian America. The event of the award cancellation at the conference is comparable to a traumatic stigma, negating the AAAS’s institutional authority and undermining its unity. This event was symptomatic of a systemic failure to unify the ideological edifice of Asian American Studies

As mentioned earlier, the direct cause of the controversy was the question over the representation of Filipinos in *Blu’s Hanging* and the cancellation of Yamanaka’s award. At stake is not only whether Yamanaka is accused of racism, given *Blu’s Hanging* as a work of fiction. Rather, the controversy also indicates the way in which Asian American Studies maintains itself as a highly visible national organization and

thus helps to determine the definition of Asian American identity. In other words, the award cancellation lets us know that a “proper” Asian American identity comes into being by the way in which particular representations of Asian American experience should be excluded as neither ethnically appropriate nor politically correct. For instance, Yamanaka’s negative depiction of Filipinos as a sexual pervert in a Hawaiian context is considered detrimental and unethical to the prescriptive system of Asian American representation, and thus taken as extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, to it. In other words, this kind of political determination over the fictional characters of the novel in social formations of Asian American identity develops into not only political but also ethical issues in an effort to do justice to Asian American representation.

In fact, the debate over the proper way of representing Asian American identity in Asian American literary studies is nothing new at all. Another well-known example is obviously the charges made against Maxine Hong Kingston, author of *The Woman Warrior*, by the co-editors of the influential Asian American anthology *Aiiieeeee!*, such as Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, and Lawson Fusao Inada. Especially, the most aggressive accuser was Frank Chin among them. During his professional career, he has accused some Asian American female writers, such as Kingston and Amy Tang, who he thinks further negative stereotypes of Asian Americans and misrepresent Asian traditional stories. More specifically, his well-known accusation against Kingston in 1980 was due to his belief that she defiles the purity of Chinese tradition in reinterpreting stories and myths in her novel by appropriating the traditional stories of Chinese Americans for the white mainstream, and perpetuating white racist stereotypes (F. Chin). In the MELUS interview by Marilyn Chin, Kingston indirectly but critically

responds to the way Asian American male writers like Frank Chin denounce their female counterpart in terms of both sexism and racism. She argues that they arguably blame Asian American woman writers for achieving their literary success by “[pandering] to the white taste for feminist writing” (66). She implies that this kind of accusation is groundless, adding, “It’s a one-sided argument because the women don’t answer. We let them say those things because we don’t want to be divisive” (66).

Interestingly, it seems that Kingston does not like the Asian American community to be divided because of her feminist perspective against its masculine authority that accuses her success for collaborating with the white racist establishment. As seen in this case, the problem of what is the normative Asian American representation has been a not only disruptive but also repressed one in Asian American literary studies. Laura Kang thus posed the question of “whether there is or can be a discrete field of ‘Asian American literature’ or ‘Asian American culture’ apart from the identity- based demands of fidelity” (33). In other words, how can we overcome the exclusive system of belief that operates within the shelter of corporal identity in imagining Asian American identity beyond cultural essentialism?

As Viet Nguyen suggests, Asian American identity adheres to certain rule of formality by which some judge particular ways of representation as acceptable and appropriate, or not. This institutional formality requires a continuous process of exclusion to maintain its universal status and to keep its authority hegemonic. Such a universal formality sustains itself by the exclusion of ‘abnormal’ particulars. It also tells us that the universality of normative Asian American representations comes true through the way in which particular forms of representation have their hegemonic

authority over the others. That is, the normativity of Asian American identity has recourse to its political division that the unevenness of power among the oppositional particulars emerges. Regarding the nature of hegemony, Ernesto Laclau says:

[T]here is hegemony only if the dichotomy universality/particularity is superseded...and the former exists only incarnated in—and subverting—some particularity but, conversely, no particularity can become political without becoming the locus of universalizing effects. (“Identity and Hegemony” 56)

Following his logic, the normative formality of Asian American identity as hegemonic is, as it were, an arena, an empty space where particular constitutes of Asian American identity as a whole try to subjugate the others and become dominant.

This post-Marxist thinking on hegemony helps understand the question, “who or what does the ‘Asian American’ refer to?” Laclau suggests that a universal definition is made possible only precariously through political struggles with the others. The concept of universality goes through a persistent process of exclusion of the other particulars through which its hegemonic authority emerges. As a result, the notion of the universal always results from contingent struggles for hegemony among particulars, and the former’s hegemony comes from the political action of exclusion, which Slavoj Žižek terms a “primordial repression” (“Class Struggle” 110).

Within the theoretical framework, the controversy over *Blu’s Hanging* as a failure of organizational unity is indicative of a disruptive particular that officially brought the question of who “Asian American” refers to to the forefront. This divisive event represents the return of what is repressed. In this regard, the event can be viewed

as one moment of the necessary struggle between universal and particular that takes place. In this moment, the already established paradigm of hegemonic formality undergoes a radical transformation and the currently dominant definition of ‘who we are’ becomes destabilized and requires its substitution. I observe that the controversy over *Blu’s Hanging* is comparable to what Alain Badiou calls an ‘event of truth.’ In *Ethics*, Badiou defines the notion of ‘truth’ as something that disrupts the organic social system of hegemonic power. He explains that something considered a truth is belatedly delivered to us through the event of revolutionary eruption carrying out so anti-hegemonic a procedure that breaks apart the systemic establishment that has produced the truth. In addition, he gives a definition of the term ‘event’ as a historical incident emerging as un-decidable or unfathomable from the standpoint of the hegemonic system as universal. Such a revolutionary event can give birth to the “truth” that enables us to get detached from the ideological establishment of hegemonic power, such as the totalitarian state, to recognize its universal operation of domination, and, in turn, to resist it.

The disruptive event of the award cancellation in the 1998 AAAS conference falls into the Badiouean event of truth. The conflicts over *Yamanaka’s Blu’s Hanging* inflicted on the institutional body of Asian American Association an irrecoverable ‘scar,’ an ideological failure of constituting the association as an organic whole in totality. The resulting controversy has undermined its organizational authority; moreover, it revealed that the association cannot tolerate negative representations of Asian Americans and denied recognizing them. In the wake of the event, the AAAS had to face heavy criticisms that it has been too much institutionalized and cut off from the

community (Chu 3). Mark Chiang argues that the event was so traumatic as to impair the critical orthodoxy of Asian American literary studies and called into question some of the most basic assumptions of the field (18). Further, Viet Nguyen sees the event as the radical instance of initiating a crisis of representation in the Asian American body politic, heralding the disruption of the association. He even comments on the event as “the crisis of representation] over ideological diversity” (9) in Asian American literary study. To me, this traumatic event is the event of truth dismantling the obsolete paradigm of Asian American representation, and brings out a new one by bringing to the surface the former’s contradictions. Above all, the event served as an opportunity to make some alterative truth of Asian American identity insofar as the recurrent question, “who we are,” becomes no longer a question for a temporary debate but a consistent statement that sheds light on the contingent face of Asian America.

Chiang mentioned that the lesson in the wake of the event remains unclear, yet it seems clear to me that the rubric ‘Asian American’ designates a political entity that must be transient, arbitrary, and contradictory in nature. The meaning behind the denomination has recourse to a contingent political action or determination to name an amorphous life-substance in place or to define it for the sake of the U.S. body politic. The definitive as well as universal way of proper Asian American representation does not exist; rather, its fundamentals are set up on a persistent process of exclusion and censorship as seen through the controversies over *Blu’s Hanging*. This reminds me of what Slavoj Žižek calls a “site of political universality.” He argues:

[I]n politics, universality is asserted when such an agent with no proper place, ‘out of joint,’ posits itself as the direct embodiment of universality

against all those who do have a place within the global order. And this gesture is at the same time that of subjectivization, since subject designates by definition an entity that is not substance: a dislocated entity, an entity which lacks its own place within the Whole. (“Holding the Place” 313)

According to this logic, the most authentic way of being Asian American can come true only through self-negation. It is because the rubric ‘Asian American’ refers to a universal embodiment against all that is not Asian American, and my claim to be one of its kind is nothing but subordinating my ontological being to the formality. Then, how can we claim our identity as Asian American without falling into the hands of totalitarian formality that determines the proper representation of Asian American identity? (How can we deal with this philosophical dilemma?)

Asian American Studies came into existence in academia after the 1960s as an academic project to recognize a group of people that had been neither visible nor heard of properly in the mainstream culture in white America. Its birth was not entirely spontaneous, though. The political embodiment of Asian American identity took place, as Gary Y. Okihiro points out, out of the political necessity of the U.S. body politic for the multicultural awareness of both Asia and Asians in the U.S. during the early Cold War years (19). Therefore, the construction of Asian America thus has to do with its political commitment to the neoliberal body politic of the U.S. Its ideological subordination was thus imperative to the establishment of its political as well as ideological edifice to name the constituents of Asian America in place. In other words, there must be always an ontological tension between the way I defines myself as Asian

American and the way the authorities define me as Asian American. If we see the normative way of Asian American representation in terms of a universal formality, Laclau can be of help. He explains the notion of universality as a direct reconciliation of society with its own essence, which nonetheless remains a process of transient identification with the aims of a particular social sector (51). In other words, universality comes true through the political conjunction of a particular 'name' with its essential but contingent 'substance,' and thus it ends up "constitutively requiring political mediation and relations of representation" (Laclau 51).

To put it otherwise, universality indicates an ontological gap that forever prevents the particular mode of representation from achieving its self-identity. Simply put, my peculiar way of claiming Asian American identity, which strays from its normative as well as universal formality, is subject to the exclusion, repression, and perversion of my personality. The entitlement of the rubric 'Asian American' cannot be made possible in such a way that one identifies with it to the utmost extent. It is because nobody in the Asian American community can entirely be consistent with, and simultaneously unaffiliated to, the purely normative formality of Asian American identity since there is not such a fixed thing that we can define. That is, the universal form of Asian American identity always ends up with an ontological gap—an irreducible discrepancy between a particular subject (content) and a social entitlement of life-substance (form). In terms of Asian American identity, its universal formality can come true only on an imagined level as the gap between 'who I am' and 'what I am socially entitled.' In addition, the hegemonic authority of ideological identification

comes out when one can effectively mediate the two on an absolute level and convince us that there is such a thing called a universal form of Asian American identity.

The controversy around Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* bears witness to how our everyday perception of the normative representation of Asian American identity is related to the ontological gap as mentioned above. Our commonsensical judgment of a good or bad representation of Asian American identity is de facto concerned with our continuous effort to reduce the gap within the normative formality of the Asian American we fantasize every day for our confirmation of who we are. More specifically, this effort refers to our 'political unconscious' to reduce uncertainties of our self-identity as social construct in terms of race, sexuality, gender, etc., and thus to repress the potential eruption of ontological contradictions in our identity. Here, the political unconscious, a term used by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, can be translated as the "false consciousness" through which individual subjects identify with the content and material of all ideological constructs including the rubric 'Asian American.' Jameson points out that even a Marxist analysis fails to unmask the false consciousness of class ideology because individuals cannot remove themselves from the totality of the social structure where they live. In this sense, our effort to close up our ontological gap is seemingly well paid off by feeling at ease about the way our self-identity comes into being insofar as we receive the false consciousness of class or race as our 'true' self that comes true.

The question is, however, what if what Jameson terms the "dialectical reversal" occurs in our everyday reality, an individual subject's anti-ideological experience of "decentering" the (false) consciousness that constitutes his/her self-identity. Jameson

posits that the subject who goes through the dialectical reversal must necessarily feel the real self as “extrinsic or external to conscious experience” (*PU* 283)—that is, as detached from his/her determination of self-identity by, say, class or race as a social construct. This is comparable to one’s feeling the Real as the ontological gap in his/her identity in negation of the symbolic determination of ideological subjectivity by all kinds of social constructs. Even if individual subjects ultimately fail fully to close up his/her ontological gap, there must always be potentials of having the radical experience of detaching, namely, ‘dis-identifying,’ themselves from the false consciousness that determines their identities one way or another

The controversy around *Blu’s Hanging* makes identity determined under the rubric of ‘Asian American’ de-familiarized and even alienated. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this traumatic event indicates an eruption of the unfathomable Real which resists symbolization in our reality. In this respect, we can imagine radically otherwise the ‘un-imagined-yet’ dimension of our identity that fully breaks away from the hegemonic establishment of Asian American identity. This not-yet-known identity of Asian Americans considered the Real remains inaccessible yet to us, but our political unconscious is still in pursuit of the true universality of Asian American identity. This universality can come true only in the continuous process of negation, exclusion, and questioning of who we are and who we would be. Žižek states:

Universality becomes ‘actual’ precisely and only by rendering thematic the exclusions on which it is grounded, by continuously questioning, renegotiating, displacing them, that is, by assuming the gap between its

own form and content, by conceiving itself as unaccomplished in its very notion. (“Class Struggles” 102)

The traumatic event Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* brought about is what assumes the ontological gap—that is, the repressed and excluded dimension—of Asian American identity. Only through such an event can we see the gap split open, the traumatic Real that, on the one hand, reveals the unknown dimension of our identity, and, on the other, heralds the potential to complete the imaginary and closed picture of its universality. The award cancellation is thus considered the cause of the “dialectical reversal” that disturbs the established formality of Asian American identity by which, for example, Filipinos as “Human Rats” in *Blu’s Hanging* cannot be acceptable. In that sense, the opponents of Yamanaka’s fiction award cancellation cried for aesthetic freedom against censorship. The vindication of artistic freedom is, I think, an expression of the political unconscious to go for the ‘road not taken.’ In other words, it is to prevent the current formality of Asian American representation from its full closure and thus to dismantle, as Žižek puts it, “the establishment of a closed transparent social space with no opening for a free subjective intervention” (“Holding the Place” 317).

Dialectical Self-Reflection

As scholars expressed, the Fiction Award cancellation in the 1998 AAAS and the following controversy was felt as traumatic as to bear witness to the crisis of representation in the Asian American identity politics. Even though locals blamed Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* for her inappropriate portrayal of fellow islanders, they also downplayed her endeavor to depict the repressed dimension of their subaltern

experience as colonial subject speaking pidgin. They took it as exposing their repressed memory of colonial experience and thus undermining their positive aspiration for modernization. It reminds me of the aggressivity of the subject expressed toward its mirrored image in Lacanian psychoanalysis. One's mirrored image as abject is too traumatic to face directly. In this sense, locals' subalternity has an effect on their subject formation to be schizophrenic in terms of hybridization insofar as their modernized identity results from overcoming their past one, which is the very cause of their transformation, and the latter always-already haunts the former whatsoever. In fact, this kind of inconsistency in identity construction is not limited to local Hawaiians; it is for anybody who has felt an ontological gap as an inherent split of their identity caused by the ideological onslaught of capitalist modernity in particular.

I interpret Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* as a sign of the "dialectical reversal" that a particular constituent prevents the hegemonic formality of Asian America identity from being complete or dogmatic. It was an expression of the political unconscious to keep the chance for a "free subjective intervention" in the field of Asian American identity. It can be thought as something that hinders locals from realizing an ideological closure in the symbolic reality of the mainland's cultural imperialism in which otherwise their local identity, memory, and experience is fully eliminated. It is imperative to note that the ideological closure of a hegemonic normativity is nothing but totalitarian and thus nightmare as Alan Badiou suggests, "every effort to unite people around a positive idea of the Good becomes in fact the real source of evil itself... [E]very revolutionary project stigmatized as 'utopian' turns...into totalitarian nightmare. Every collective will to the Good creates Evil" (13).

I mentioned earlier what the Filipino publisher Churma spoke in an interview, “I said to myself, ‘Good Lord, what have we done?’” I regard the controversy Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* has caused as a symptom of the dialectical reversal. On the one hand, she redeems the abject subject with locals’ colonial identity, i.e., with “full of scars,” from turning into the melancholic subject making for self-destruction. In *Blu’s Hanging*, this is shown by our poor protagonist Ivah leaving the home island of Moloka‘i in pursuit of her dream in the neoliberal world. On the other, Yamanaka also prevents Asian America from being fully co-opted by neoliberal ideology by revealing its traumatic memory that haunts its members all the time. Uncle Paulo, a prototypical incarnation of the diabolic id as “Human Rats,” represents this memory in the novel. Yamanaka’s creation of such a fallen pervert is, as I contend, to make an ontological gap of the established Asian American identity—that is, an oppositional gesture—against the hegemonic authority of the mainland that colonizes Hawai‘i in the name of modernization. No wonder Churma was so confused about “what we have done,” because the “we” has become the Janus-faced hybrid of both colonial and neoliberal, as it were.

Chapter 4

The Ambiguity of Neoliberal Subjectivity:

Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*

In the previous chapter, I discussed the representational problem of Asian American identity via the controversial event of the cancellation of Yamanaka's AAAS Fiction Award in 1988. In it, I demonstrated how the heated debate has since exposed contradictions and inconsistencies especially in the field of Asian American literary studies by calling into question the way Asian American identity is politicized. Yet it seems the cause of such debate lies constantly latent in both political and aesthetic fields of Asian American studies and consistently ready to erupt any time. It is partially because they may as well be taken for granted to prevent the prescriptive formality of Asian American identity from being dogmatic. I agree with Mark Chiang in that the question of aesthetics in Asian American literary studies is informed by the "collision of [the] antithetical modes of reading—an autonomous and a heteronomous one" (34). The gap between autonomous and heteronomous informs us how persistently Asian American studies revolves around issues of the subjective construction of a positive identity as yet susceptible to, and dictated by, the norms and ideas of liberal multiculturalism. The controversy around *Blu's Hanging* showcases the eruption of Asian Americans' anxiety for refashioning the extant Asian America to the transnational construction of pan-ethnic Asian America. Thus, it bears upon the recent endeavor of Asian America to break from the extant binary of white and Asian in terms

of race-oriented identity politics. Moreover, the anxiety also manifests their hysteria to move beyond the simplistic framework of resistance and accommodation or good and bad, for it cannot properly challenge and grapple with the contradictory politics at play in complex and multi-layered depictions of Asian American race.

Marking conflictive, inconsistent sites within the identitarian collectivity of Asian American studies might be able to bring to light new perspectives on the formation of Asian American subjectivity. Yet they do not simply refer to the way in which new forms of the subject are newly discovered, illuminated, and developed, as is often the case when it comes to the celebratory rhetoric of identitarian diversities, heterogeneities, and multiplicities. The new perspectives are rather informed by Kandice Chuh's notion of "imagining otherwise": "To imagine otherwise is not about imagining as the other, but rather, is about imagining the other differently" (9). As she well points out in her *Imagine Otherwise*, Asian Americans' construction of national subjectivity to achieve a fully legitimate American status does not always guarantee the identity as equivalent to achieving social justice. As witnessed in the previous chapter, the colonial conditions of native Hawaiians cannot but be perpetuated insofar as their nativist movement is impaired and unappreciated in the complicate power dynamic between oppositional Hawaiian identity and cosmopolitan diasporic one. In this regard, Chuh makes for disciplining effects of what she calls a "nation-ness" in terms of the deconstruction of a prescriptive Asian American identity to accomplish the consistent reformation of its institutional field and social formations.

Relevant to Chu's notion of "subject-less discourse" (9), my last chapter approaches Asian American identity not as a positive materiality of the identitarian self

nor as a political base of claiming national subjectivity in terms of identity politics; rather, it is taken as a flexible critical orientation to illuminate the power relations of knowledge production in light of the U.S. body politic that produces subject positions as contradictory and inconsistent to one another. Through the critical analysis of Asian American identity, this chapter shows “undecidability” in Chuh’s terms (79) or ambiguity of Asian American subjectivity, which is, more often than not, exposes an ontological gap with its identitarian self. This gap is tantamount to the gap between the autonomous and the heteronomous in light of the power dynamic among different subject positions beyond the ontological limits of their prescriptive identity. With that said, this paper turns to *Blu’s Hanging* once more to examine yet another aspect of the issues around Asian American identity. This time, my analysis is mostly invested in a close reading of the novel. More specifically, this chapter subverts the accepted understanding of two oppositional characters in terms of good vs. evil—Eleanor Bertram (Mama) and Uncle Paulo in relation with what I have discussed so far.

Advertisement

An official website for tourism and commerce of Hawaii introduces the island of Molokai as “the Most Hawaiian Island, where the legends of Hawaii live on” (Hawaiiweb.com). This second smallest island among the major Hawaiian Islands is both literally and figuratively ‘far far away’ enough to keep the primordial spirit of its exotic primitivism. Kaunakakai, a city where the Ogata family lives, is literally a three-block-size town on Molokai: “There are no traffic lights on Molokai...The town closes up early so do any shopping before the dinner hour. Many of the buildings in the town

are original structures. The Molokai Public Library, for example, was built in 1937 and is still the only library on the island” (Hawaiiweb). This ad copy designed to attract entrepreneurs and tourists informs that this city has no traffic lights, closes up as early as at dusk, and has no public facility ever built since 1937. For people from the mainland, it is hard to believe that such an underdeveloped place still exists on American soil in the twenty-first century. It is even ironical that the ad copy uses a phrase like “no traffic lights” to attract ‘neoliberal consumers’ in the U.S. at the highest peak of capitalist modernity.

The ad copy implies that the island’s unlikely landscape intrigues consumers more effectively. At stake is, however, if this ad fulfills what neoliberal multiculturalism promises to Americans, such as the globalization of capital and labor, the universal enhancement of standard of living, and the equality of racial and cultural differences, etc. Stereotypically known as a multicultural paradise, this underdeveloped island is a contradictory site that remains an ontological gap in the neoliberal world of globalization, for it has even “no traffic lights.” It is ironical that the island becomes more attractive to tourists from the main land thanks to its unrealistic attribute. The island, in this regard, constitutes the obverse dimension of the outer world of global modernity, which shows the ambiguity and ambivalence between the desired and the forbidden or between the sublime and the vulnerable.

The ad copy might have succeeded in alluring curious consumers to this far-away island, for this *unnatural* space is not taken for granted as part of the dazzling world of global capitalism; the more the island seems unreal, the more consumers get into it. In other words, they fetishize this alien place because of its ontological

inconsistency with the outer world—an obscene site out of place that arouses their voyeuristic desire. Slavoj Žižek calls such a site of inconsistency and unreality “the Real,” which always already exists in the guise of identifiable and ordinary forms in our reality where the so-called Law of the Symbolic dictates. The Lacanian notion of the Real represents an inconsistent locus or presence that exists out of place and thus traumatizes those in place because of its extraordinary attribute. Only via misidentification and displacement does this unlikely site of the Real, which our reality cannot properly symbolize, turn into a place of attraction in the guise of more admissible forms, like the advertized island of Molokai despite its *extraordinary* conditions of living. In a more accessible guise hiding its traumatic dimension, the Real becomes a fascinating locus for people from the outer world. Reversely speaking, the island in the guise of a multicultural paradise masks its structural problem, namely, “social antagonism” as Žižek puts it in *Interrogating the Real*.

With “no traffic lights,” the island of Molokai can be a virgin paradise as long as the traumatic dimension of poverty, violence, racism, or the like remains repressed or disguised. This island is an inconsistent particular in the universal space of capitalism neoliberalism, a hegemonic force to modernize or ‘rape’ local peoples, economies, and cultures.⁵⁹ In its antagonistic relationship with the hegemonic force, this island

⁵⁹ J. K. Gibson-Graham compares global capitalism to an act of rape, an intrusive violence over diverse local economies. This de-territorializing force is more positively described as the lateralizing process of the integration, circulation, and internalization of commodity culture. Gibson-Graham’s theoretical project, which is invested in imploding the capitalist economic structure of “unity,” “singularity,” and “totality,” has recourse to the binary between Capitalism (“monster”) and Non-capitalism (“the absence of desire”). The patriarchal “rapist” Capitalism operates as prevalent practices of hierarchical representations of class, gender, and the world. In the antagonistic relationship, the latter refers to the domesticated,

paradoxically ends up a virgin paradise. Such a stereotype of the island also reveals how perverse the Law of the Symbolic that global capitalism dictates is by nature, for it obscenely enjoys its own universality being transgressed by the inconsistent presence of the island leaving it virgin and vulnerable at the same time. Namely, the outer world of global capitalism lets the local place remain virgin only by turning the particular into its own exception.

What is advertised by the ad copy refers to the Real in the guise of a more accessible form or a stand-in. The island as advertised, namely, a multicultural paradise, thus results from misidentification and displacement; capitalist neoliberalism cannot fully represent the real dimension of the island at its purest, creating the ontological gap between the Real and the advertised or the Symbolic. This gap certainly comes from the ongoing but concealed reality of (neo)colonialism on the Islands of Hawaii. In a similar vein, Josephine Lee observes Hawaii as a contradictory space where “social stratification...in terms of income level, land ownership, access to education, and political representation continues to belie its reputation as a multicultural paradise” (“AAI” 121).

This ontological gap is fit for the philosophical scheme of Hegelian dialectics. Žižek points out that the ruling ideology can claim its universal authority only grounded on the exclusions of its own particulars. The ideological universality is thus contingent and constitutive upon the exclusions by “continuously questioning, renegotiating, [and] displacing them, that is, by assuming the gap between its own form and content, by conceiving itself as unaccomplished in its very notion” (“Class Struggle” 102). The ad

independent, or less sophisticated household system of underdeveloped or developing Third World economies.

copy manifests such a paradox insofar as it can attract consumers only by rendering the island exceptional to the outer world of capitalist neoliberalism.

The self-contradictory rhetoric of the ad copy as a form of cheating⁶⁰ transforms the colonial island into the fantastic space that obfuscates the Real. This obverse, namely, colonial dimension of the island indicates the harsh reality where the indigenous remain underprivileged and underrepresented. It exposes the repressed dimension of Hawaii beneath the stereotypical layer of ideological reality that sublimates it as a paradise. Nevertheless, the ontological gap of the island also bears witness to what the colonial reality purports to conceal as its’ “repressed point of reference” (*The Plague* 7). In other words, the island with an ontological gap functions as a short circuit whereby the symbolic dimension of the paradise island and the real dimension of the colonial island merge into each other; the island takes shape as a pure ideological incarnation as the “*truth* of the most effective form of a *lie*” per se.

The Fictional versus the Advertised

The island of Molokai that Yamanaka depicts in *Blu’s Hanging* is closer to the other end of the short circuit in opposition to its fantastic dimension as advertised.

Ivah’s narrative of her family saga revolves around the primordial absence of her “Mama” from the beginning. Her narrative begins with a life “after Mama’s funeral”

⁶⁰ Žižek defines ideology as the “truth of the most effective form of a lie” (*Sublime* 30). Given that, the gap inherent in the subject between the Real and the Symbolic is neutralized through the ways in which the subject falsely recognizes its own self. This misrecognition in the pure form of a lie functions as an epistemological distance of the subject from its immediate symbolization. Through the distance, the subject assumes its role as an ideological agency dictated by the Law of the Symbolic.

(3)⁶¹, and lack of motherhood in the family brings attention to Mama who is present in Ivah's narrative only in memory, misidentification, or displacement. The dead is always with the family in her absence—the spectral Mama. She turns out a haunting spirit that the Ogata children incarnate in her stand-ins, such as Ka-san, black dog they believe Mama's spirit resides in. Ivah says, "Mama is a speck of white way inside our dog, walking and thinking, saying my name over and over" (116). Moreover, the Ogatas and Aunt Betty believe the big black moth in her house is the spirit of Mama too as "the Japanese say about those big black moths [as] the dead" (79). They assume that the moth landing on Betty's picture is there to punish her for lashing out at Poppy and insulting his family.

Mama's absence in the family defines the unlikely reality where the Ogata family is situated leading a life full of child exploitation, rape, sexual abuse, racism, animal killings, and extreme poverty. The tragedy that besets the family without Mama seems unremitting as culminating in Blu's sexual delinquency. In the *veiled* reality of the island that is otherwise a paradise, the disturbing conditions of the family's life thus appear attributed to Mama's absence. The word "veiled" is an essential term that characterizes the underprivileged life of the Ogata family in the novel, for their life as such is veiled by the colonial discourse that the Hawaiian Islands are a multicultural paradise. It is also veiled by the repressed past of Poppy and Mama as lepers, which has remained "one secret for so long" to the children. Ivah's narrative lifts both veils that reveal "the other side" (141) of what has been 'advertised.' In this way, her narrative

⁶¹ All citations from the novel are marked with page numbers with neither book title nor author's name in parentheses.

successfully convinces the reader of how essential Mama is to childcare as the incarnation of ideal Motherhood.

The Ogata family's neighborhood in Kaunakakai is contrary to how the ad copy advertises; it is a perfect locale for a harsh and melancholic life. Rie Makino describes the village as a "multiethnic jungle without order where there are no rules, each individual needs to protect oneself from racial, sexual, and class terrorism" (115). When alive, Mama used to teach her children to keep away from sexual predators in the neighborhood, such as the Kuro-chan "with his dark skin, green eyes, and kinky gold-tipped hair" (14). The beautiful landscape of the island advertised in the ad copy degradingly turns out a forlorn and isolated town as Blu says, "In Kaunakakai we're five years behind Hilo, and Hilo's five years behind Honolulu, and Honolulu's five years behind the mainland" (136). This fictional dimension of the island is in radical contrast to the advertised wherein the multiethnic jungle transforms into the virgin paradise of multicultural America. The island with "no traffic lights" can be as beautiful and authentic as it is primitive and savage. Namely, it has a dialectical dimension in itself insofar as one negates the other and vice versa. The advertised has an identity of which ontological signification confirms to the dictates of the Law of the Symbolic, neoliberal capitalism. On the level of the Real, the same island remains desolate, colonized, and demonized—the absolute negation of the advertised.

In fact, the symbolic reality of our everyday life is subject to the dialectical relationship between the advertised (the Symbolic) and the fictional (the Real): the negative dimension of the latter lays the foundation of the positive edifice of the former.

Žižek contends:

The Lacanian Real is that traumatic ‘bone in the throat’ that contaminates every reality of the Symbolic, rendering it contingent and inconsistent.... The Real is neither presocial nor a social effect. Rather, the point is that the Social itself is constituted by the exclusion of some traumatic Real. What is ‘outside the Social’ is not some positive a priori symbolic form/norm but merely its negative founding gesture itself.

(Interrogating 323)

Given that, *Blu’s Hanging* is comparable to the return of the repressed as is always already immanent in the ideological reality that produces the advertised. The fictional as a misrecognized or displaced form of the Real that cannot be symbolized exposes an anti-ideological dimension—i.e., the traumatic “bone in the throat”—of the colonial reality of Hawaii. Therefore, Ivah’s narrative necessarily conceives an apocalyptic vision of local Hawaiian identity in contrast to the island advertised in the symbolic reality that proclaims all people are born equal by citizenship and qualified for democratic freedom with equal opportunities.

The fictional island of the novel, however, is not entirely anti-ideological since it also exists in the guise of the traumatic Real as misidentified and displaced. Thus, the subversive effect of the fictional in the Symbolic is limited and ambiguous, and its disillusioning dimension becomes compromised insofar as it also creates another object of *being advertised*, namely, the object of *fantasy*—the sublimation of “Mama” as ideal Motherhood. Ivah’s narrative convinces the reader that lack of motherhood causes the family a primordial anxiety that they might not survive the reality of what Rie Makino calls a “multiethnic dystopia” (90). It succeeds in turning the spectral Mama into the

emblem of ideal Motherhood, an ideological discourse that conforms to the heterosexual normalcy of patriarchal family ideology. In other words, *Blu's Hanging* discloses Yamanaka's ambivalent attitude toward the ideological reality where neocolonial discourse erases the material conditions of colonial Hawaii and where gendered motherhood is integral to the patriarchal structure of ideal family.

Melancholic Perversities

In "Mourning and Melancholia," Sigmund Freud suggests that people in mourning can detach their object of loss from themselves and fully externalize it to mourn over it consciously; however, in the case of melancholia, the lost object is internalized unconsciously to their psychic permanently and thus bereaves them of their ego. Melancholic symptoms, such as the subject's self-reproach and loss of self-esteem, show the condition of uncompleted grief leaving the subject in an immeasurable state of emptiness. Namely, the subject in melancholia becomes anti-social, bereaving itself of its positive role in the Symbolic. The subject in such an absolute negativity is so schizophrenic a state of mind that subject and object are not identifiable separately. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng claims that this nightmare condition of identificatory confusion is fundamental to the melancholic experience: Freudian melancholia "designates a condition of identificatory disorder where subject and object become indistinguishable from one another" (125). Melancholic individuals cannot redeem their lost object of desire unless they identify themselves with that object. They sacrifice and renounce themselves in a way to "hang onto the lost object as part of the ego in order to live and [end] up denigrating and blaming the self" (Cheng 104). This

radical state of being in an identificatory disorder reflects the melancholic subject's absolute self-negation as witnessed in a pathological symptom of the so-called "death drive."

In *Blu's Hanging*, the Ogata children's symptoms of melancholia are obvious in coping with their loss of Mama. Ivah's hysterical response to sexuality and poverty, Blu's incessant gluttony and sexual delinquency, and Maisie's aphasia and anxiety get more serious in their efforts to supplement Mama's absence. In other words, the children's melancholic symptoms take place through their obsessive and impulsive overconsumption and successive substitution of stand-ins for Mama in a synesthetic fashion (Cheung 206). Erin Suzuki claims that Blu's unquenchable consumption of junk food and pop culture is seen as a "negotiating subjectivity within the boundaries of a society defined by the prior loss of an idealized past" (Suzuki 36-7). Here Suzuki identifies Mama with "an idealized past." In her perspective, all products of the mainland-based capitalist system are implicated in Hawaii's own history of colonization and disenfranchisement. Insofar as Mama's absence is juxtaposed with the lost sovereignty of colonial Hawaii, the children's uncontrollable consumption of various alimentary and cultural products is unable fully to replace Mama's absence. The children's melancholia thus extends to such a degree that they suffer from racial melancholia that racialized subjects in colonial Hawaii go through in *Blu's Hanging*.

In fact, the Ogata family is not the only one in melancholia. Uncle Paulo, the controversial Filipino character, is also subject to the melancholic condition of subaltern life that remains exceptional to the world of capitalist neoliberalism: "Fuck, Japs for think they mo' betta than everybody else, fuckas. Especially the Filipinos. Fuck,

everybody for spit on Filipinos, shit. You fuckin' snipes" (207). Paulo's racial melancholia obviously passes into his notorious perversities as sexual predator. He touches vaginas of his under-aged nieces under water in a swimming pool; has sex with them in their house; sodomizes Blu; and sells drugs. He goes to church only to seduce Paulette, a Christian girl, into intercourse. Rie Makino argues that Paulo represents a local masculinity against the mainland one. She continues that his sexual exploration "recalls his desperate reaction to U.S. capitalistic class and racial hierarchy by terrorizing and conquering adolescent female bodies from various ethnic backgrounds" (90). As Makino suggests, Paulo stands for local masculinity expressed over young children in the neighborhood, and his sexual violence takes after the colonial violence of the mainland committed to the local. In this regard, his transgressive practice of sexual perversion is the local/nationalistic response to or mimicry of the foreign imperial power of the mainland.

However, I contend that Paulo's masculinity functions as the symbolic agency of neoliberal capitalism to 'rape' the local.⁶² The connection of his identity with the mainland is more concretely figured via his truck, Da Sun: "the yellow Datsun truck with the "t" sanded off, a 76 orange ball, and a black panty lace tied to the radio antenna" (149). As a form of pun, 'the Sun' is a conventional emblem of the phallus in patriarchal culture as is also colored in yellow, a stereotypical racial color of Asians. In

⁶² The term "local" has a distinctive implication in the context of colonial Hawaii against determining the U.S. as a nation of immigrants. Maria Zamora argues, "A powerful yet veiled underside exists to this local narrative of identity—a denial of the political status of indigenous peoples" (86). This term differentiates the indigenous from Asian settlers in terms of, as Zamora puts it, "a distinct racial/ethnic power structure" (86). Suzuki defines the "local" as "an ambivalent, unstable identity marked and shaped by the material effects of colonization, immigration, and race-based class stratification" (38).

addition, the “76 orange ball” is the well-known corporative landmark of Union Oil Company based in California. In this sense, the radio antenna with the ball as well as a women’s laced panty on Paulo’s phallic truck symbolizes the cultural imperialism of the mainland over Hawaii, rather than local masculinity but. Paulo is also proud of his appearance similar to the white actor Davy Jones from *The Monkees* on TV (Makino 57), showing off a gesture of mimicking white colonial authority over local virgins. It is true, as Makino points out, that “The adolescent female bodies, in keeping with the theory of U.S. Manifest Destiny, become virgin landscapes that stimulate Paulo’s colonial desire”; however, his sexual perversities as cursing the racial and class hierarchy as an anti-colonial gesture (Makino 92) should be thought in a nuanced way. His mimicking colonial authority via Davy Jones empowers him to seduce all the local girls into his Da Sun, but his sexual perversities as performing colonial authority does not necessarily aim for the counter-violence against white masculinity. His subversiveness comes from his becoming the object of fantasy fully realized.

Paulo’s consistent pursuit of sexual pleasure does not quite fit into the oppositional framework of local vs. colonial masculinity. Rather, he is an ideological automaton co-opted by cultural imperialism, but not precisely in a way that its ideological norms might have intended in terms of producing its social subject. Paulo’s sexual exploration is ideologically so consistent with the colonial practice of ‘rape’ over the local that he transforms into a pure form of ideological utility. Paulo ‘subject-lessly’ repeats without reserve what the Law of the Symbolic dictates in terms of colonial

masculinity performing its global invasion into virgin locals.⁶³ Rather than placed in the binary between local masculinity (resistance) and colonial one (collaboration), Paulo becomes a ‘subject-less’ utility that fully materializes capitalist neoliberalism, achieving its ideological closure and becoming its symbolic agency. His ontological being with no ontological gap—he is the very ideology in himself!—identifies with the traumatic Real that contains an “inherent antagonism of the ideological edifice [of the Universal]” (*The Plague* 3). Paulo’s excessive enjoyment of sexual pleasure discloses the true face of neoliberal capitalism, implying the violent intrusion of the horrible Thing in the space of capitalist neoliberalism.

In Freudian terms, Paulo might be thought of as the id that the superego, the symbolic agency of prohibition, represses in our daily reality. In a similar vein, he is the melancholic subject of primordial loss, a Filipino, the most underprivileged race in colonial Hawaii. In fact, his sexual perversity challenges the normalized formation of individual psychic in which the superego represses the id. Moreover, it undermines the colonial authority of white masculinity that should forbid and repress the racial Other’s subversive indulgence in sexual pleasure. Paulo’s sexual perversion is not only symptomatic of racial melancholia but also infringes on white masculinity by becoming the pure incarnation of an anti-Social, Evil, against white colonial authority. His sexual perversity is his only choice left, as implicated in the phrase “Give me liberty, or give me death,” when it comes to his ontological signification as nobody (“everybody spit on”) in absolute melancholia. His presence as such is equivalent to what Julia Kristeva

⁶³ Global capitalism as a symbolic agency of neoliberalism in the post-war era is often notorious for the economic penetration of the Third World metaphorically expressed as “rape,” while the rape itself might be read as a “pregnancy,” rather than “the destruction and death of indigenous economic capacity” (Gibson-Graham 131).

terms “abjection”⁶⁴: he is nothing but the subject of ‘no-thing,’ an ontological “shit” in the Symbolic.

Paulo’s racial identity as “shit” works as a purely ideological concept similar to the phallus: the paradoxical short circuit that has two functions both to urinate (as nothing) and to procreate (as something) simultaneously. Žižek describes the phallus as the very pulsation between the everything and the nothing” (*The Universal* 70-1). The shit also works similarly as a short circuit that relies on the fine line between the intestines (Something) and its excrements (Nothing). Paulo’s shit-like identity also passes into the sublime object of pure Evil in absolute negativity, the total negation of the positive substance of subjectivity dictated by the Law of the Symbolic. Paulo, an abject being in racial melancholia, identifies with the anti-Social of Evil, an anarchistic symptom to resist an ontological immersion in the hegemonic space of capitalist neoliberalism. This is comparable to the way in which the subject fully identifies itself with an object of fantasy—a fantasy that not only provides an imaginary scenario that enables us to endure our presence ideologically constituted in the Other’s desire but also radically shatters and disturbs our passive subjection to our reality (*Welcome* 18).

Žižek insists, “desire emerges when drive gets caught in the cobweb of Law/prohibition in the vicious cycle in which jouissance must be refused” (*The Plague*

⁶⁴ Julia Kristeva defines the abject as that which is negated yet ultimately essential to the formation of the ontological boundaries of the subject: the abject serves as something that “is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous” (1). In other words, the abject constitutes a pivotal part of subject formation that an individual should paradoxically sublimate for the sake of his/her ideological totality or sanity as normal subject before the Law of the Symbolic. Otherwise, it remains a ‘stain,’ an ‘unfathomable X,’ which cannot be properly represented in the ideological reality of the Symbolic. The notion of the abject is thus in opposition to the notion of substance that gives body to the symbolic appearance of the subject and turns it into an object of signification through the process of ideological subjectivation.

32). Paulo's sexual perversity results from his racial presence of being abject as Filipino, which makes his desire foreclosed in the first place. In this regard, fantasy is the imagined narrative of those in racial melancholia in repudiation of the Law of the Symbolic, since it stages the process of the renunciation and negation of the very Law (*The Plague* 32). Paulo in the highest degree of racial melancholia identifies himself with pure Evil as a radical choice to negate his ontological being as nothing. Thus, he becomes the object of fantasy in negation of the Law as an obscene gesture to fill his ontological void with the "dazzling and fascinating experience" (*Interrogating* 45)—that is, his excessive enjoyment of sexual pleasure. He turns into the pure incarnation of the phallic that can 'lawlessly' have sex with his young nieces, our protagonist Blu, and the beautiful Christian girl Paulette, riding in 'the Sun with the penis-like antenna' to "[poke] virgins" (57).

Paulo's excessive pursuit of sexual pleasure not only violates the Law of the Symbolic and disturbs the Social, our reality; but it also exposes the horror of the traumatic Real that the conservative politics of the Symbolic conceals—i.e., the global/colonial invasion/rape of Capital over local people, culture, and economies. Identifying with his own fantasy, Paulo becomes a "repressed point of reference" that both operates as concealing the horror of the traumatic Real and creates what it purports to conceal (*The Plague* 7). Paulo, a pure contingency that perturbs the ideological texture of the hegemonic universal, ends up the perverse object of fantasy that capitalist neoliberalism obscenely dreams about.

Fantasy Realized

As underprivileged Hawaiian Filipino in racial melancholia, Paulo has an ontological gap, the traumatic Real, that bereaves him of his positive substance in the Symbolic, and it causes him to identify with the gap because the Symbolic negates his positive substance. As a result, Paulo becomes its object of fantasy, pure Evil, which is an impossible-real object of desire in the *advertised* space of the island, the virgin paradise of pristine beauty. Due to his radical identification with the ontological gap of the traumatic Real, his abject identity radically changes into an absolute being in totality with no ontological gap, a pure phallic being with no substance. His identity as Filipino is elevated to or occupies the impossible-real place of the Master-Signifier of desire.⁶⁵ Paulo's 'shit-like' identity of abjection passes into that of who is omnipotent enjoying sexual pleasure regardless of the Law of the Symbolic. This impossible-real being of fantasy refers to the 'sublime object of desire in negativity' or the incarnation of pure Evil. He can perform, on the level of the id, what the colonial discourse of capitalist neoliberalism, namely, the superego, can fantasize most radically, such as devastating local economies/cultures and raping local virgins—insofar as he is the pure embodiment of the ideology.

Blu admires Paulo with the perverted power of indulgence and is attracted to his car "Da Sun" (the Sun/the Phallic): "I would buy this car... Nice, yeah, this Datsun..."

⁶⁵ Žižek explains the Master-Signifier as the "Das Ding." This structural and contingent place, he argues, occupies the sacred/forbidden place of *Jouissance*, rather than relates to the qualities of the sublime object of desire. Namely, the ontological place of *das Ding* is empty. Žižek states in regard to the formation of the sublime object of desire: "an object becomes holy simply by changing places—by occupying, filling out, the empty place of the Holy... The place logically precedes objects which occupy it... [Thus] a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire. The sublime object is an object elevated to the level of *das Ding*" (*Sublime* 194).

we go take off the ‘t’ from Datsun and make um Da Sun like...Uncle Paulo....Uncle Paulo no look like Davy Jones...? I mean, he Filipino, but he no look like one kinda haole-ish Monkee to you?... He my best Monkee” (68, 138). Even after Paulo raped him, Blu confesses to the spectral Mama in pray: “I wanted to tell you my inner feeling... I scared when I see Uncle Paulo’s Da Sun. Mama, please no hate me, but wanna tell somebody the truth. When [he] did that to my penis, wen’ feel good... Maybe I like do um again... Is it wrong when something feel good?” (253). Paulo, the emblem of pure Evil, turns out the sublime object of the Real, and its absolute totality in negativity where positive substance is totally negated takes over the virtues, ideals, and norms in capitalist neoliberalism. Namely, he becomes the other end of the short circuit in the ideological reality, such that his pure-Evil presence counterposes the holy incarnation of ideal Motherhood/pure Good, the spectral Mama.

Paulo’s sexual perversity is a symptom of racial melancholia, for it originates from a compulsive reaction to his racial identity that is abject and negated in colonial Hawaii. His melancholia is essentially not different from that of the Ogata children. Their endeavor to supplement Mama’s absence cannot be the same as Paulo’s indulgence in sexual pleasure. Yet Paulo’s pleasure principle conforms to what the symbolic Law of neoliberal capitalism obscenely dictates, such as the global force’s invasion/rape of the local, things in fantasy that have been repressed in the name of ethics. Paulo not only carries out but also identifies with the fantasized and thus disrupts the Law by ends up being the fantasy realized. As previously mentioned, fantasy not only conceals the horror of the traumatic Real, but also exposes what it purports to

conceal as its “repressed point of reference.” Paulo becomes the fantasy realized of what capitalist neoliberalism dictates at its most radical.

Paulo as the fantasy realized becomes what the Ogata children call “Human Rat,” signifying excrement⁶⁶ in the neoliberal space; he becomes the phallic, the signifier of the ontological gap or the short circuit whereby the penis for procreation and the one for urination meet. Unlike the Ogata children who keep their secret desires to replace Mama’s absence in fantasy, Paulo’s goes material and *public* as witnessed by his Da Sun, his phallic space where his fantasy comes true. Ivah observes, “Paulo’s left hand around his own penis, his right hand around Blu’s, the slapping of flesh, Paulo spitting in his hands and the quick jerk over skin...Paulo spurts out of himself, white mucus, all over the steering wheel, and leans back, moaning” (247). His sexual perversity remains neither in secret nor in fantasy. The secret desire of the Law of the Symbolic, capitalist neoliberalism, radically comes into reality via Paulo, its symbolic agency that is most effective. Paradoxically, his absolute identification with the Law fantasies stigmatizes him as pure Evil, the anti-Social that disrupts an ideological consistency in the neoliberal space that the Law dictates. He becomes the pure incarnation of “MaLeSTeR” and “HuMan RaT” that Maisie writes on the walls of Paulo’s house, a place “in dog shit, warm and foul; cat shit, sweet cinnamon rot; and the red, red dirt that stains [the Ogatas’] heels” (251).

⁶⁶ Žižek contends that the most basic element that constitutes the unfathomable X of human subjects is “formless shit,” and becomes the signifier of taboo in a civilized society. He states, “it comes from inside the body, and this inside is evil, criminal: This is the same speculative ambiguity as we encounter with the penis, organ of both urination and procreativity: when our innermost being is directly externalized, the result is disgusting. This externalized shit is the precise equivalent of the alien monster that colonizes the human body, penetrating it and dominating it from within, and, at the climactic moment of a sci-fi horror movie, breaks out of the body through the mouth, or directly through the chest” (*The Puppet* 150).

Hence, Paulo refers to the pure materialization of neoliberal capitalism, its obscene agency that brings to reality what it really wants in fantasy. His perversity results from his immediate identification with the Law of the Symbolic, which maintains its hegemonic authority through prohibition and discipline against what it obscenely holds in fantasy. Fantasy realized is not only paradoxical but also nightmare, for it perturbs the Law that both bears and represses the fantasy and negates it whose superego dimension should maintain the division between reality and fantasy. Žižek explains how ideology can be ‘workable’ in our daily life:

[A]n ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it, that there is a rich human person beneath it: ‘not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person’ is the very form of ideology, of its ‘practical efficiency.’ (*The Plague* 21)

What makes ideology workable is our dreaming of fantasy that sustains and operates on the ontological gap between our symbolic dimension of humanity (particular personalities) and our real dimension of animality (universal instincts), so to speak. Interestingly, the former that seems individually unique is constituted as ideological, and the latter that seems common to everybody is anti-ideological or subversive, for the Social is structured by excluding the latter as the excremental remainder of it.

Only through the reference to this gap can we see what we desire in fantasy, not in reality. Žižek calls the gap a “trans-ideological kernel”: “In every ideological edifice, there is a kind of ‘trans-ideological’ kernel, since, if an ideology is to... effectively ‘seize’ individuals, it has to batten on and manipulate some kind of ‘trans-ideological’

vision...which makes an ideology ‘workable’” (*The Plague* 21). This trans-ideological vision takes place in a way that, in the formation of the subject, the private self (‘the mysterious X’ of the subject) and the public self (the constitutive substance of ideological subjectivation) remain differentiated from each other. Through the reference to this trans-ideological vision, individuals become ideologically interpellated and ‘seized’ by an ideology even without knowing it.⁶⁷ Thus, Žižek regards fantasy as a double bind. On the one hand, it is an ideological investment in mediating between the formal symbolic structure (neoliberal capitalism) and its utility (Paulo) and thus to teach him how to desire. It obfuscates, on the other, ‘the horror’ of the Real (its obscene dimension: ‘raping virgins’) beneath the stereotypical layer of ideological reality (as described in the ad copy); it “creates what it purports to conceal as its ‘repressed’ point of reference” (*The Plague* 7). Paulo collapses the trans-ideological vision by becoming his own fantasy realized, materializing the trans-ideological kernel, the Real that should be repressed.

The trans-ideological vision obscures and de-contextualizes the political by deliberately misidentifying as pathological the horror of the Real that surfaces in the Symbolic. In this way, the Real or any obscene fantasy realized in reality remains concealed in the guise of a psycho’s perversity, megalomania, insanity, etc. Thus, the trans-ideological vision works as a buffer zone between fantasy and reality where the Law of the Symbolic can repress and displace the Real. Paulo removes the vision and becomes detrimental to the Social. This is a truly traumatic nightmare where the horror

⁶⁷ In relation to this, Žižek mentions, “in a universe in which all are looking for the true face beneath the mask, the best way to lead them astray is to wear the mask and truth” (*The Sublime* 42). In a similar vein, one of his many books is titled “For They Know Not What They Do”.

of the Real returns in the Symbolic. If Paulo's sexual perversities were considered acceptable to the symbolic space of capitalist neoliberalism, it would have radically shifted the balance of the entire ideological hegemony.

As Žižek points out, a truly subversive practice to society is not so much to ignore its law on behalf of disruptive fantasies as to stick to the law against the fantasy, which sustains it (*The Plague* 29). An ideological edifice is undermined by the “too-literal identification” between fantasy and reality, and thus requires a minimal distance between them. This minimal distance is an “official insignia,” a purely formalistic identity with a double bind that, on the one hand, reduces traumatic and subversive fantasies to its purely material sign (repression), and on the other, constantly evokes a temptation to expose them simultaneously (the return of the repressed). In this regard, the notion of official insignia works as a kind of monument that signifies, or symbolically contains in it, something people has cherished, lost, or suffered, such as memories of war, death, and even love. In the novel, such an official insignia appears as that of Paulo at the end: “MaLeSTeR ...HuMaN RaT.” Despite the traumatic and subversive presence of Paulo in the fictional reality of the novel, Yamanaka does not allow her narrative end up in a nightmare. On the contrary, she concludes it in a rather conservative and religious manner. Why does she do that? The following sections are invested in finding the answer to this question.

The Spectral Mama

Paulo is *officially* stigmatized in public as “MaLeSTeR” and “HuMaN RaT.” His identity turns into a purely material sign of the anti-social as sexual predator. His

ontological being is reduced to the indelible stains written on the walls of his house, which turns him into an immortal form of pure thought, an emblem of pure Evil: “Paulo scrubs with Brillo, fast and furious, checking to see who’s looking, his walls stained for life” (251). In the world of neoliberal capitalism, he was born as an abject subject, works as its symbolic agency to realize its obscene fantasy, and winds up stigmatized as anti-Social. His stigmatization implies that his ontological signification is equivalent to the stains on the walls, an immortal insignia as sexual predator. Thus, he is marked as a sinner, the ‘excremental’ object of excommunication. Insofar as the stains remain indelible, he is doomed with no hope of being redeemed.

Mama is in contrast to Paulo. She was also born abject and melancholic, like Paulo, even with a body “full of disease” and its resulting scars, a contagious excremental body of leprosy. Yet, unlike Paulo’s phallic incarnation that turns into a pure thought of sexual perversity, her ‘scarred’ body has an ontological gap not fully exposed, for her symbolic signification is not excremental but procreative. Her scarred body has an ideal form of contradiction: the more she is looked at as abject (the subject of negation), the more effectively she embodies ideal Motherhood that not only procreates the ‘clean’ bodies of her children but also dies for it. Her ontological signification refers to the sublime form of altruistic sacrifice.

Blu’s Hanging is a bildungsroman⁶⁸ that shows the Ogata children’s ontological transformation from poor, vulnerable kids with no Mama to ‘ethical’ citizen subjects. At

⁶⁸ Many works of Asian American literature belongs to the literary form of bildungsroman for their universal theme of acculturation in the neoliberal society of the U.S. Its neoliberal ideology is mostly designed to Americanize Asians in a ‘friendship’ manner. As Inderpal Grewal points out, it aims for the formation of “American identities imbricated within a consumer citizenship that exceeds the bounds of the nation to become transnational” (8).

first, the novel begins with their hard life without Mama, but she always haunts the family as a ghost. She is always with her family by being absent, which in fact prevents her children from being fully mature. Thus, the novel ends with the spectral Mama “[leaving] the porch light off” (260), a ritual for the Ogata children finally to part from her with a hope, “Us all can be Mama” (259). In this typical narrative of coming-of-age story, *Blu's Hanging* depicts the children’s cultivation and experience through various means of education that culminate in their maturity. The protagonists’ maturity includes their acquirement of hegemonic social, cultural, and national values and norms, engendering their self-consciousness as normal citizen subjects. The bildungsroman has an optimal literary form of showing a normative subject formation through a life journey to the unification of society. It extols such unified subjects as ethical insofar as their otherness becomes reconciled or contained in the ideological formality of subject consciousness in the Symbolic.

In the novel, the spectral Mama is Yamanaka’s fictional construction of a reality where she works as maternal superego dictated by the disciplinary Law of the Symbolic. The spectral Mama haunts the Ogata children with her voice being ventriloquized through Ivah’s narration or memory. In addition, her spectrality is materialized as living beings, such as Ka-san and the black moth, both of which symbolize a guardian motherhood protecting the Ogata children at risk. Namely, the Ogata children’s life is indebted to the spectral Mama: “[Ivah] could tell Mama a lot of things that I learned

Through this integrating process, the U.S. becomes “the neoliberal symbol of enabling the American nation-state to disseminate the promise of democratic citizenship and belonging through consumer practices as well as disciplinary technologies” (2). Whether resistant or accommodating to it, Asian Americans end up participants as transnational agents in globalizing neoliberal propaganda, that is, as an ideal subject in the imagined community of the US.

since she died, about all the things she told me to do and not to do... This is how I try to remember my Mama. I remember all the things she told me about what to do in this life” (34). Her spectrality comes to the kids as a maternal debt.

Throughout the novel, Ivah repeatedly expresses her desire to communicate with the spectral Mama—that is, the maternal figure Ivah bears only in her memory—to tell her that she has been a good girl following what she demands all the things to do and not to do (44). Ivah confesses, “since her death, [she’s] tested all her rules” (17). Thus, the spectral Mama is an omnipresent agency of the ideological reality, an invisible gaze of superego that articulates its disciplinary Law. Her maternal authority comes from the invisibility of her immaterial body as Ivah says, “If she weren’t dead and I wasn’t afraid of talking back to someone dead, I’d say” (35). The spectral body of Mama changes into a form of pure thought, a material figure of ideal Motherhood Ivah keeps in her memory: “Mama, you died and didn’t leave me a damn clue. Teach me how to be a mama too” (37). The spectral Mama becomes a sublime object of the children’s desire through their hysterical longing for her and works as the disciplinary superego

Ivah, however, realizes that her relationship with the spectral Mama is also a “trouble” since her imaginary talking to her “may leave [her] crying forever” (34)—the ultimate symptom of melancholia. Her melancholic symptom of crying is not only because Mama’s absence cannot be supplemented, but also because she cannot fully conform to what the spectral Mama dictates. It makes her feel responsible-guilty. After knowing that Maisie has been maltreated by Miss Owens, her haole teacher, Ivah painfully reproaches herself: “Mama told me, ‘Always take care of your brother and sister.’ Now I lay me down, down. Mama. I want to kill, feel my fingers squeezing

tighter...around a white, freckled neck” (50). Ivah’s ‘responsible-guilty’ sense culminates when Blu prostitutes himself to the old pervert neighbor Mr. Iwasaki called “Kuro-chan.” It pisses her off both figuratively and literally: “I have no words for Blu, no words, but I feel it all behind my eyes, burning. A steam of urine comes down my legs” (20). Ivah repeats “Mama” (20) in her guilt complex because Kuro-chan was the number one enemy that the spectral Mama warns the kids to keep away from.

Even though the spectral Mama works as Ivah’s disciplinary superego according to the Law of the Symbolic, she is also what the Law has to repress. When the spectral Mama as the insignia of ideal Motherhood haunts the Ogata children, it brings her negative dimension to their memory. That refers to her ontological gap that returns through the spectral “scars” of her abject body “full of disease”—the traumatic Mama that has been “veiled” in the novel. Ivah recognizes them as “huge, shiny scars” that Poppy feels shame at (26). She also remembers “the shiny rivers of scars” which spread on Mama’s belly and back that Ivah used to rub oil on (44). It is oxymoronic that the ugly scars are modified by a word “shiny.” This informs the ontological gap of the spectral Mama that contains her paradoxical dimension in her spectrality—that is, both superego agency (the disciplinary voice ventriloquized) and the traumatic Real (the return of the repressed). In other words, the spectral Mama is a perfect example of the short circuit that connects monstrosity (an abject body of leprous Japanese woman in colonial Hawaii) with sublimity (ideal Motherhood for the heterosexual family ideology of neoliberal society).

The ontological gap of the spectral Mama, therefore, comes to Ivah as a double bind. She regards the scars as a map that leads her family to Mama in her memory (44).

At the same time, Ivah sees these “[w]eird scars” that the Ogata children “never had on [their] hands and faces” as something traumatic that both Mama and Poppy hid in their pockets [with] their faces...down [and] shamed eyes” (51). This ambiguity explains the duality of the spectral Mama. The ontological duality of the spectral Mama informs that the “rope” that the kids need to tie themselves with to stay together also becomes the “veil” that should be lifted to let them free (141). On the one hand, the spectral Mama is a maternal figure of ideal Motherhood, a superego agency of the neoliberal Symbolic to keep her kids clean in it. Ivah’s narrative symbolizes this “when the [child-stone] is born, there are no scars left on the mother-stone” (177).

Simultaneously, however, she becomes the signifier of an anti-Social that “forever prevents/differs/displaces the closure of the ontological edifice” (*Ticklish* 238) in terms of the return of the repressed, for her spectral scars return with the traumatic repression of colonial Hawaii. Her spectral body full of scars haunts the Ogata children with clean bodies. The ideal form of Motherhood, the spectral Mama, merges into the traumatic incarnation of the primordial abjection of Mama and the Ogata family as a whole, a “useless family” as Aunt Betty puts it (78). Erin Suzuki observes that Ivah’s “Hand, Hoof and Mouth Disease” is one of the examples in the novel that bear witness to the Ogata family’s local identity as abject—a “highly contagious” condition that causes her skin to break out in pustules. She also points out Ivah’s first experience of menstruation as abjection: “Why me? I feel dirty. There’s lots of blood” (Suzuki 41). Additionally, Poppy is described as the abject subaltern who “smells like Pine-Sol all the time” (5) as Miss Owen rudely says to Ivah: “Nobody wants to sit near Maisie and my room smells like a janitor’s nightmare” (60). Such spectrality of the haunting body

“full of disease” with scars is not only limited to the parents’ generation but also pervasive onto the whole family including the innocent bodies of the children.

Therefore, the efforts of the Ogata children to supplement Mama’s absence ironically become a contradictory gesture to cut the imaginary “rope” that links the family with her spectrality. Poppy “so fucking lost” uses the rope to tie his body against his dream walk, the ultimate symptom of melancholia. Ivah has believed that this rope helps wrap the whole family to keep them close to one another (146). To put it another way, their wrapping the family with the rope evidences how desperate they are to get connected to the spectral Mama that Poppy ambivalently “[prays] to God every day that [he] be release from” (140) but cannot. At last, Ivah cuts this rope for Blu. Blu also tried to “fly...anywhere in this world,” against her will, to a place where no Ivah, no spectral Mama, and no disciplinary Law of the Symbolic is present in terms of the death drive, but he also could not “escape the house without a mother, the days and nights without a father” (162). Despite her guilt complex, Ivah “[loosens] the knots in the rope that tie him to [the spectral Mama], and let the rope fall away” (162): “I have nothing to say... How do I make the world stop for Blu? Hang on to this earth, I want to say. But there’s no more rope to hold him” (174). She starts to untie the imaginary rope, which lets her possibly pursue her own way away from the spectral Mama. Namely, she also gets away from the spectral Mama. Eventually, it is Ivah who flies away, giving up on the spectral Mama, which is the ultimate task Yamanaka’s bildungsroman narrative assigns to Ivah: “Us all can be Mama.”

At the other end of the short circuit that displays the spectral Mama as ideal Motherhood is there the traumatic dimension of her ontological signification, the

leprous body of a Japanese woman “full of disease.” The Ogata children cannot grow up as a *normal* and ethical subject whose ontological signification conforms to the Law of the Symbolic if she keeps haunting them. The spectral Mama keeps reminding them of the repressed memory of their abject subjectivity. The more Ivah obeys the spectral agency of superego Motherhood, the more it makes her guilty: “Now I lay me down, down, let me go, let me be normal. Don’t wanna be a Mama too” (157). Thus her leaving the family to study in the prep school Mid-Pac in Honolulu is the only choice she has to survive the reality that negates, alienates, and stigmatizes her family. Ironically, this leads her fully to conform to the Law of the Symbolic, capitalist neoliberalism. It means her voluntary subjection to the (neo)colonial reality that excludes ‘scarred’ bodies like those of her parents. In this way, Ivah cuts the rope of the spectral Mama finally in pursuit of a neoliberal life with “no laundry, no cooking. No Blu” (151). This is the imagined life that capitalist neoliberalism has disciplined her to dream of throughout the novel, through Yamanaka’s coming-of-age narrative.⁶⁹

The Passion of Mama

Blu’s Hanging shows the ontological transformation of the Ogata children from the melancholic subject to the neoliberal subject. This ontological transformation seems directed toward a determined end. As typical in a bildungsroman narrative, they are *naturally* born immature and imperfect, and it is their determined destiny to upgrade

⁶⁹ In “Spreading Traditions: Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s Bildungsroman,” Inconata Inserra suggests that, compared to the 18th-century British novel *Jane Eyre*, *Blu’s Hanging* is atypical of the western tradition of the bildungsroman because of the uncertainty of reliability on the protagonist Ivah’s narration (200). Thus, she argues that Yamanaka’s novel breaks away from the Anglo-American cultural tradition.

their ontological values in society whether it means coming-of-age or ideological subjectivation. They opt for binding themselves to the hegemonic power of political authority that perversely defines how humanity should be or consist of by excluding people like their parents with racialized bodies of abjection.

This novel, however, also reveals that the Ogata children's destiny to be born abject and melancholic is not simply natural but artificial. Their doomed destiny is contingent upon political determinism on who should remain inside or outside at the arbitrary threshold of defining ontological values of human beings. As Erin Suzuki points out, the poor kids' difficult life originates from their parents' "displacement from a society informed by mainland norms of health and ideal citizenship" (42). As mentioned in the previous chapter, when young, both Mama and Poppy were dislocated to Kalaupapa, a small village in Molokai designated for forced leprosy settlement from the late nineteenth century to the year of 1969. Leprosy is historically linked to sexual dissoluteness and bad hygiene in colonial Hawaii. This racialized disease works as a racial stigma that not only demoralizes local Hawaiians but also engenders a cognitive mapping of racial hierarchy. The scarred body of leprous Mama is not ontologically compatible with her children, which is the a priori cause of her primordial absence in Ivah's coming-of-age narrative. Mama's overdoses of poisonous sulfone, which "eat up her kidneys" (144), are a hysterical gesture to deny her ontological being indelibly stigmatized, which becomes her original sin of being born 'excremental' in colonial Hawaii. In such an "ethical ideology" in Badiouian terms where the leprous, the fallen, is primordially not granted "political life," Mama's only way to redeem herself was to be 'born again' via her 'clean' children. Poppy says, she "wanted for prove to the world,

everybody, that we could make perfect children...so that she neva abandon her kids her family did her” (144-5). She sacrificed her life for her children who did not inherit her scarred body, and she turns spectral haunting them to secure her maternal protection of her children.

Yet the spectral Mama’s haunting the family also signifies an alien intrusion of maternal superego. She is the spectral creditor who sacrificed her life for her children’s ‘clean and strong’ bodies: “*Be strong, clean yourself every day*” (115). The symbolic debt loaned to the children a priori is their inherent original sin that they should pay for. Not only is this the primordial cause of their ‘responsible-guilty’ sense as the hysterical symptom of melancholia, but it also establishes the subconscious dimension of ethical ideology in *Blu’s Hanging*. At least to Ivah, the spectral Mama is a manifestation of not just ideal motherhood but also disciplinary superego. As a living dead “so fucking lost” in the death drive, Poppy demands Ivah in place of the spectral Mama, “me and your madda, us had leprosy. I like your promise that you neva call us lepers. Don’t eva define us again by that disease” (141). In response to this, Ivah goes hysterical: “I want to turn away and hid my face. I want to put my head down on the table, cover my ears, make Poppy stop” (142). She has to pay her back at any rate.

The Ogata children’s bodies with no scars turn out a symbolic debt from Mama at the expense of her life. Fully acceptable to the neoliberal space, they should pay for their clean and strong body from their Mama. This is why the spectral Mama haunts them as the disciplinary agency of superego in the guise of ideal Motherhood. Moreover, Mama’s sacrificial death can be figured as a quasi-religious act of redemption by delivering her kids from the a priori sin, leprosy. Mama, in this regard, incarnates

herself as the very original sin herself, which reflects the ambiguous dimension of the spectral Mama—that is, the short circuit of both ideal Motherhood and “shame under [the kids’] skin” (145). As a result, despite her ontological signification as ideal Motherhood, the spectral Mama ends up a fateful obstacle that hinders her children from eventually assimilating into the civil society of the mainland. The spectral Mama should be negated or sacrificed again via no physical death this time but spectral death: Ivah says, “Mama gotta find her way to heaven, not home.” Blu yells, “Mama...Heaven ain’t here” (260). She should be absolutely gone at the end.

Similar to the way the Christ’s blood and flesh is symbolically consumed by his disciples in a cannibalistic fashion, Mama’s scarred body as the trope of Asian motherhood in America is offered as a sacrifice to the altar particularly for her daughter Ivah. Ivah finally finds salvation and succeeds in getting into the multicultural civil society where both modernity and colonialism meet. She ends up reborn as citizen subject but carries herself with a traumatic memory of her Mama’s body full of scars. The spectral Mama might still haunt in her memory, “in the shoebox full of treasures she has kept under her bed” (260), the box she carries onboard leaving the island.

Conclusion

More Questions about Asian America

This dissertation reconsiders the extant critique of Asian American identity politics in Asian American literary studies. The intellectual “war of position” initiated over claiming the legitimacy of Asian America has been articulated in the combined terms of *both* race and gender. I argue that the way in which the war of position is articulated in the binaries between nationalist and feminist critiques and between race-bound identity politics and non-identity politics is a misguided framework for understanding the point at issue in Asian American literary studies. That is to say, the intra-racial anxiety about the identity-based politics of Asian America originates not so much in the identitarian distinction between the real and the fake or between the good subject and the bad subject; rather, it is attributed to a discursive gap in the self-affirmation of “what Asian America is” within the larger framework of American nationalism. This gap results from the variable extent to which Asian Americans make their dynamic relationship—namely, both resisting and collaborating—with American nationalism in relation to which Asian America came into being both autonomously and subordinately.

Since the serial publications of both *Aiiiiieee!* and *The Big Aiiiiieee!* since the 1970s, the point at issue in Asian American literary studies has consistently been about how the identity of Asian America should be represented in the face of the racializing and gendering of Asian American subjects in the United States. The debate between

identity-based nationalists and deconstructive pluralists has continued but remains unresolved while their gendered and racialized subjects increasingly become diversely and widely recognized in U.S. culture. It has contributed to spreading the idea of America as a liberal state of multiculturalism where liberated subjects are blessed with making “free choices.” At stake was that not only the formation of identity-based Asian America but also the rise of pluralist critique against it became possible only within the nationalist framework of U.S. multiculturalism which has produced contingent and contradictory subjects of both assimilation and resistance.

It is true that Asian Americans ambiguously remain in the permanent limbo of *becoming* both Asian and American but not *being* either of them in full—a sign of both exclusion and resistance to the American nation. Yet the question is to what extent Asian American subjects can afford to repudiate the hegemonic matrix of American nationalism which produces ethnic subjects as a site of hierarchical racial and gendered formations. In the following discussion to conclude this dissertation, I will focus on the paradoxical construction of Asian America to the extent that its definition is considered provisional, contingent, and conflictual. Nonetheless, the collective term “Asian American” can remain effective despite its known shortcomings insofar as the political movements establishing a society where social justice and equality come true have recourse to the nationalist formation of Asian America.

Losing Face, Losing Unity

Recently, scholars and writers in Asian American literary studies have challenged the race-bounded identity politics of Asian America in opposition to its

exclusionary trope of ethnic essentialism. During the course of the war of position, as a result, the ethnic contours of Asian America have become blurry. In Asian American literary studies, the idea of Asian American nationalism is no longer understood as a liberating movement of colonized subjects to establish an independent community which is free from the racism of white America; rather, it is perceived as a reactionary movement of ethnic conservatives to set up an androcentric as well as xenophobic state which vies with white America. On the one hand, the reason is that the conventional way of defining the nation became obsolete and unable to recognize diversified subjects and identities within the ethnic parameter of the nation. On the other, we can also find the reason in terms that those subjects break away from the nationalist framework of Asian America.

The real question, in this case, is how these repressed subjects in their intra-racial relations could register their anti-hegemonic identities which repudiate the identity-based politics of Asian America and contradict its limited definition of the ethnic nation. Is it that the diversification and multiplication of Asian American subjects and identities has been realized autonomously in response to the war of position? Otherwise, is it that the conventional way of understanding Asian American identity politics in terms of race has become no longer useful in creating resistance to the American nationalism of white supremacy?

The so-called postmodern consumer culture of the U.S., which became clearly distinctive after the Cold War officially ended in the late 1980s, has expedited the globalization of U.S.-led capitalism and consumer culture. Both realms of culture and political economy greatly contributed to the formation of American nationalism as a

symbol of freedom and liberty in late twentieth century. The articulation of American nationalism as the only superpower and world police became widely accepted throughout the globe in accordance with the unprecedented formation of an exclusive free-market system. The emergence of global capitalism in earnest infinitely promoted the liberal idea of a free choice as central to the formation of liberalized subjects within the system of capitalist democracy. The ideology of multiculturalism thus lies in an ambivalent way that, on the one hand, ethnic minorities, through regulations of immigration and citizenship, are created as racialized and gendered subjects vis-à-vis normative subjects of white America; on the other hand, multiculturalism simultaneously renders them American as subordinate or belonging to the governmental system of U.S. multicultural nationalism. Insofar as those minoritized subjects contribute to the idea of America as a liberal state, their ambivalent positions can be accepted as legitimate in the American nation especially at the moment of national crisis, such as war and terrorism. As a result, the synergetic combination of both free market systems and nationalist multiculturalism give rise to diverse, heterogeneous, and multiple identities as postmodern tropes under the larger rubric of what Inerpal Grewal calls the “consumer citizenship” of the U.S.

As Grewal points out in her article, “Transnational America: Race, Gender and Citizenship after 9/11,” the formation of consumer subjects and identities in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity is neither stable nor essential but provisional and contingent (541). The multicultural tropes of multiple identities are produced and circulated as a consumable choice according to the capitalist logic of the free market. More importantly, they function as a governmental technology of the liberal state, rendering

de-politicized the racial, class, gendered, and religious formation of consumer subjects which takes place in resistance to the hegemonic state power. The liberal tropes of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity sustained within the free market system regard the formation of identities as a matter of personal choice and cultural consumption, and at the same time, these tropes continue their productions and circulations within the governmental framework of American nationalism where they become subject to regulation and control. On the one hand, ethnic subjects that can possibly claim their belonging to the American nation only via their hyphenated or hybrid identities usually identify themselves as oppositional to the state of white supremacy in an effort to assert their rights to full citizenship. At the same time, on the other hand, these minoritized subjects in terms of race, gender, and any other forms of difference, cannot but pledge their allegiance to the American nation as a whole. In this regard, Grewal points out the ambivalent formation of modern subjects in the framework of U.S. multicultural nationalism as follows:

Multiculturalism in the U.S. has produced such dynamic and contingent subjects within which the hyphen ceases to be a sign of resistance to the American nation but rather becomes the marker of a contingent ability of those with such an identity to switch from one side of the hyphen to the other but at other times to challenge the American nation with this contingency. ("TA" 538)

Through the intellectual war of position in Asian American literary studies, the real point in question is not so much whether Asian American identity should either preserve its authenticity or become diversified, un-decidable, and subjectless; rather, it

is to what extent the nationalist formation of Asian America is linked to regulatory practices of the liberal discourse of the U.S. which produces its pluralist identities in the name of “freedom” as “a symbol of American nationalism” (“TA” 542). In other words, the identity-based nationalism of Asian America as an intellectual as well as political movement against the state power of white supremacy is only understood within the context of U.S. multicultural nationalism, which combines the realms of both culture and political economy. Moreover, the criticism that the cultural nationalism of Asian America is inappropriate because its androcentric essentialism creates intra-racial discriminations against women and other minoritized subjects in the nation is missing the following point: that is, such a nationalist representation of Asian America is recognized only in affiliation to the liberal regime of American nationalism which appropriates Asian America for its consumer culture and agenda of capitalist democracy in U.S. popular culture. That is to say, the anxiety witnessed in the war of position in Asian American literary studies is not strictly a concern over how the face of Asian America should *represent* itself to others; rather, it is more closely concerned with how the face of Asian America is viewed or *represented* within the liberal culture of multiculturalism.

To represent or to be represented; that is the question of life and death insofar as the war of position in Asian American literary studies is no more than the question of whether the freedom of Asian American subjects is truly autonomous or, rather, given or manipulated. For instance, the debate over Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s 1997 novel *Blu’s Hanging* has not so much to do with the way in which certain subjects of Asian America are represented in racist or sexist terms in the novel; rather, the kernel of the

debate is about how Asian America saves face amidst the contradictory politics at play in complex dynamics of race in the multicultural U.S. In other words, the controversy over Yamanaka's novel in 1998 arose because *Blu's Hanging* exposed the way in which Asian America finds itself not only fragmented due to the irreducible differences of the lived experiences of its members but also its being situated in-between two antagonistic nationalisms: the anti-colonial movement of Hawaiians' native nationalism and U.S. colonialism at Hawai'i. As I discuss in Chapters three and four, Filipino Hawaiians, represented by Uncle Paulo in *Blu's Hanging*, are considered colonized subjects in the U.S. even today. Moreover, these chapters talk about how, following Candace Fujikane, Asian Americans in Hawaii have a settler identity which benefits from the liberal formation of U.S. multicultural nationalism—that is, nothing but colonialism from Hawaiians' perspectives.

As discussed earlier, American nationalism produces multiple as well as overdetermined subjects and identities via the transnational movement of ideas, labor, goods, and capital within the universal framework of capitalist multiculturalism. This can happen via individual and collective identifications of the subjects within consumer culture's use of choices. Given this, within the colonial context of Hawai'i, Asian Americans' transnational and diasporic identities cannot make a *free* choice of their subject position in an ethical and politically correct manner, nor claim its nationalist legitimacy in resistance to the liberal state of white supremacy. In this case, Asian America is split not so much in such a conventional way as cultural nationalists vs. deconstructive pluralists, as in the following way: colonized Pacific islanders vs. diasporic intruders. In this shifted framework, the extant definition of Asian America

becomes no longer valid and appropriate, which I consider a critical cause of anxiety among the members of Asian America as witnessed at the 1988 Association for Asian American Studies conference in Hawai'i and afterwards.

Conclusion

This dissertation leaves many questions unanswered and many problems unresolved regarding the topics and issues about Asian American identity, Asian American nationalism, and Asian American representation, and Asian American Studies. It is probably because my theoretical as well as analytical approaches to them are less comprehensively structured or framed than it should be. But it is also because these topics and issues which currently come to the surface in Asian American studies are grounded in something always unstable in form and constantly changing in meaning: that is, the imagined figure of Asian America. In relation to this, I have found a consistent intellectual praxis in the extant scholarship of Asian American literary studies: that is, scholars in the field tend to ask questions and raise problems based on their assumptions about the relationship between their imagined Asian America and their writerly positions in connection to it in terms of race, if not anything else.

As a result, such subject and writerly positions of scholars in the field of Asian American studies tend to allow them to look at Asian America from the insider's point of view. This means that the formal framework of Asian America as an object of study has not changed much despite the recent scholarship based on deconstructive pluralism; what they deconstruct and diversify are subject positions and the following identities within the nation of Asian America, but mostly not Asian America itself. Obviously, my

dissertation is no exception to this self-reflective criticism. My racial identity alone, which I usually assume does justice to my writerly position as a critic in Asian American studies, might be able to give an answer to the question, why I began my research in the way I did and why I chose topics and issues from the field of Asian American studies. Because of such limitations, as well as a self-motivation about my research, this dissertation probably lacks a more comprehensive and objective framework in which rethinking Asian America can be implemented from the perspectives of other American nations in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and class. In particular, as what is definitely absent in this dissertation, black America should have been discussed in illuminating the complex formation and conflicting politics of Asian America, which thus will be part of my next project after this dissertation.

In her *Imagine Otherwise*, Kandice Chuh appropriately points out what I have thought but not been able to articulate better: “What, finally, I think subjectlessness can help us to do is to articulate Asian American studies as an unbounded field, one that while in the structure of the academic institution is not structured by it” (151). Except for her making use of the term “subjectlessness,” I agree with Chu’s idea that Asian American studies or Asian America in general needs to be discursively unbounded and institutionally un-limited. This can, I think, enable us to reconsider Asian America from the more objective viewpoint of the outsider. The question is how to do it, however. Chuh already argued that we have to “imagine otherwise,” but it remains a question, at least to me, regarding how it comes to realization in the praxis of our intellectual inquiry.

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