

RECOLLECTING MEMORY, REVIEWING HISTORY: TRAUMA
IN ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

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My dissertation focuses on representations of traumas in select eight Asian North American novels. I attempt to draw attention to this underrepresented issue of the Asian minority's traumatic experiences. Trauma in my discussion includes double consciousness, national trauma of war, white racism toward the Asian minority, children's perspectives on melancholia and loss, as well as psychosomatic trauma and violence on the female body.

In Chapter One, I argue that in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, double consciousness is represented as a racial(ized) trauma that creates an ideological dichotomy between East and West, and constrains the

identity of the Asian minority within the *two*. I propose that a multiple identity of racial minorities with performative possibilities in a nation-state should be taken into account. Chapter Two demonstrates how war causes trauma on the private body and memory of victims in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*. War victims collect traumatic memories inside their bodies and recollect these memories repeatedly as corporeal evidence of political persecutions. Chapter Three discusses children's perspectives on melancholia and loss, and their racial/ethnic identification in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* and Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*. Both novels provide comical yet critical accounts about children's experience of losing loved ones, their discovery of sexuality, and their acceptance of racial reality during their maturation into adulthood. Chapter Four explores female trauma and transnational connections in Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence*. In these novels, the trauma of the women characters suggests that the female body should be reconfigured beyond the biological function of reproductivity by the heteronormative standard. With the shared experience of violence, the women characters cross the temporal and spatial boundaries, and reflect global concerns about the autonomy of the female body.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: TRAUMA IN ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN LITERATURE

Charlie Chan and Madame Butterfly are not necessarily dead. Instead, they have been relegated to the dark realms of the unspeakable and the unconscious.

Eleanor Ty, *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*

My dissertation is an interdisciplinary critical study of representations of traumas in eight Asian North American (ANA) novels, including Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging*, Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*, Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, and Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence*. I analyze these eight novels in terms of their thematic commonality of representing various forms of trauma of the Asian minorities in the United States and Canada. The recurring theme of trauma seems to consistently "haunt" the ANA members, and traumatic events in public history constantly remind ANA writers of their collective and individual memories. Trauma scholar Kirby Farrell remarks that trauma is not merely a clinical notion but also a cultural trope. He concludes, "As a trope, trauma helps account for a world in which power and authority may seem overwhelmingly unjust. The trope may be a cry of protest as well as distress and a tool grasped in hopes of some redress" (14). This idea leads us to consider formation of

trauma as closely related to the hegemonic political power that regulates the ideologies of culture, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion.

Trauma in my discussions contains the following forms: the reemerging issue of racial/ethnic identity and double consciousness of ANA members, trauma in private memories embedded in public history, children's perspectives toward racial reality, and transnational feminism's concern about violence against the female gender around the world. My purpose of studying trauma in ANA literature is to reconsider that racial issues in North America are not just about black and white; Asian North Americans are the invisible racial minority who also suffer from different forms of trauma in history. To illustrate the trauma of the Asian minority, I review the socio-political situation of the Asian minority in the histories of the U.S. and Canada. I argue that racial discriminations experienced by ANA members and their subsequent generations are left unnoticed because public history silences them and disavows their traumatic experiences.

The under-representation of Asian North American literature in the academy and in mainstream culture motivates me to study this racial minority literature. Historically, the Civil Rights movements in the late 1960s and the 1970s propelled Asian American Studies programs to thrive in colleges and universities.¹ Asian American literature has been growing rapidly. After the success of Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, who drew mainstream readers' attention to literary expressions of Asian Americans, Asian American literature became one of the important branches in minority literature of

North America. Since Asian Canadian authors and scholars joined the cultural production and academic forum in the late twentieth century, Asian North American literature (including Asian American and Asian Canadian literatures) has expanded its themes and narrative devices, creating new paradigms to accommodate the diversity of Asian North American demographics and experiences.

Unfortunately, ANA literature is still not widely explored in academia. One reason is that before the Civil Rights movements, ANA literature was mostly published with a limited amount by small-scale Asian-owned publishers. During the Civil Rights movements, non-white minorities started to show their ethnic awareness and articulate their voice. Realizing this profitable advantage of publishing racial minority literature, major publishers bought out the copyrights from those small publishers. This reality illustrates that small publishers failed to compete with major corporate publishers. Besides, publishing industries, mostly run by Euro-Americans, controlled the censorship and only published ANA literature that portrayed positive images of mainstream society or represented exotic stereotypes of Asian culture. Elaine Kim points out that some Asian American books were published during the 1970s because they represented Asian Americans' non-threatening, non-militant perspective of the "model minority" while many others that addressed the reality of racial discrimination and social prejudice had been censored out ("Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature" 151-52). ANA literature failed to pass down through printed resources to next generations because publishing industries intentionally obstructed its

¹ The first Asian American studies programs were established at San Francisco State College (now

cultural transmission. Another reason that contributes to the under-representation of ANA literature is that academia in North America has been dominated by white faculty members who either lack the knowledge to access Asian North American Literature or refuse to acknowledge its importance in American literature. ANA literature has been considered “narrow and specialized work penned by aliens to whom the English language and the culture it represents can never really belong” (E. Kim, “Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature” 152). In terms of the disadvantage of minority literature in the academy, Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd remark, “One aspect of the struggle between hegemonic culture and minorities is the recovery and mediation of cultural practices that continued to be subjected to ‘institutional forgetting’, which, as a form of control of one’s memory and history, is one of the gravest forms of damage done to minority cultures” (6). ANA literature fails to be advocated effectively in the academy and in the general public. Therefore, I dedicate my academic study to ANA literature, hoping the public and academia will start to appreciate its aesthetics.

Asian Canadian critic Eleanor Ty comments on the invisibility of Asian North Americans that “Asians have been almost invisible in mainstream North American public and cultural spheres. Our economic contributions and labour have not been made evident; our stories do not make prime time TV shows, and the distinctions between us are often effaced and overlooked” (4). This under-representation truly affects the socio-political power of Asian minorities in mainstream society. Not only do they lack public

University) and the University of California at Berkeley in 1968.

spokespeople to identify with, but as a result they follow western standards and feel inferior toward their own cultural traditions. Ty remarks, “Charlie Chan and Madame Butterfly are not necessarily dead. Instead, they have been relegated to the dark realms of the unspeakable and the unconscious” (12). She predicates that ANA writers have done a marvelous job in representing the traumatic experiences of ANA members forgotten in mainstream American/Canadian culture in order to make “the invisible” visible to the public (12).

Ty’s comment reminds me of my own status as a member of the Asian minority in mainstream society. Socially, an Asian minority member is subject to various stereotypical comments. Academically, as an Asian Americanist, I have developed a great interest in reading literary texts written by authors of different racial/cultural backgrounds. I have been conscious of the Asian North American texts taught in the classroom. In keeping with the invisibility of the ANA experience, Asian North American texts are commonly left out in the curricula of most literature courses and seminar discussions. In my undergraduate years, the only Asian American authors taught in class were Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and David Henry Hwang. In graduate courses, the same authors were still being repeated. The progression of ANA literature has seemed to stagnate. Although I found the works of the “big three” fascinating, this tokenism in western canonization failed to represent the overall capaciousness of ANA literature. In addition to the primary ANA authors and their works, I began to pay attention to other ANA works that are not presented in the primary academic field.

In order to conceptualize how different forms of trauma are represented in Asian North American literature, I will explore the following questions: (1) Is racialization inevitable for racial minorities in mainstream society or is there any alternative for them to escape from it? (2) How do collective identity and ethnic-specific identity play out in ANA literature? Do different ethnic groups experience trauma differently? (3) How do the selected eight ANA novels represent racial/ethnic issues in North America? What ambivalences, strengths, or constraints can possibly be involved? (4) Can ANA literature work beyond the discussion of racial issues? Are there new themes and concepts emerging in the post-1990s ANA literature?

Asian North American Literature: Historical Contexts

The concept of “Asian American” is derived from the political agenda that seeks to integrate Americans of Asian descent to consolidate and defend themselves against the political hegemony of the dominant group. In the late 1960s, Asian American activists, consisting mostly of college based members, called for their own organization as opposed to other racial minorities. The debate over “Asian American” in the 1970s initiated Asian-origin Americans’ racial identification and the establishment of Asian American studies in colleges and universities. Frank Chin and other coeditors published the first anthology of Asian American Literature entitled *Aiiieeeee!* in 1974.² In the introduction to this anthology, Chin and his coeditors defined “Asian American” in an extremely provincial sense as “American-born, English-speaking, non-Christian, male.”

² The *Aiiieeeee!* editors include Frank Chin, Shawn Wong, Paul Jeffrey Chan, and Lawson Inada.

They also limited their definition of Asian Americans to three ethnic subgroups—Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos. This gender-specific masculinist definition of Asian Americans excludes the female gender and newly-arriving, multiethnic immigrants who were not born in the United States, and people of different religious beliefs. This definition based on their masculinist ideology is absolutely discriminatory and biased.

However, the masculinist definition of “Asian Americans” by Chin and his coeditors originates from their discontent with the persecutory treatment of early Chinese immigrants in the U.S. Before 1968, because of various exclusionary immigration laws and exploitative labor policies, women and children were prohibited from entering the United States, for they were considered by the racist government as “aliens ineligible to citizenship” (Wong and Santa Ana 178). Chinese male laborers lived in Chinatowns, the “bachelor societies,” where wives were absent and traditional nuclear families were impossible to form. Chinese male immigrants worked in the service-sector menial businesses traditionally considered “feminized” forms of work, such as restaurant, laundry, or houseboy. They were objectified as exotic *others* and emasculated into desexualized beings. In the hegemonic white ideology, there is a clean binarism that separates the majority and the minority, white and the *other*. Under this ideological classification, without sociopolitical power in mainstream society, racial minorities tend to be feminized. Espiritu remarks:

[A]s part of the Yellow Peril, Asian American men and women have been depicted as a *masculine* threat that needs to be contained. On the other hand, both sexes have been skewed toward the female side: an

indication of group's marginalization in U.S. society and its role as the compliant 'model minority' in contemporary U.S. cultural ideology.

(*Asian American Women and Men* 88)

Against white ideology that gendered minorities, Frank Chin and the coeditors of *Aiiieeeee!* strived to proclaim the "masculinity" of Asian American men. Their masculinist discourse acknowledged "Asian American" as male, heterosexual, non-Christian, non-immigrant, American-born, English-speaking subjects. Since the late twentieth century, this outdated definition has been replaced by the diversity of Asian American identities and heterogeneous representations of "Asian American" with multiple voices and facets.

Given that "Asian American" is a collective concept that fails to represent the diversity of Asian ethnicities, recognizing the political category of "Asian American," however, has its pros and cons. By the mid-1970s, the pan-Asian identity began to be recognized politically and "used extensively by professional and community spokespersons to lobby for health and welfare of Americans of Asian descent" (Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity* 35). It proves that this pan-Asian identity helps promote socio-political agendas and benefits for Americans of Asian descent. According to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, the term "Asian American"

expresses a political conviction and agenda: it is based on the assumption that regardless of individual origin, background, and desire for self-identification, Asian Americans have been subjected to certain collective experiences that must be acknowledged and resisted. [...] it is not meant

to obscure the unique experiences of each subgroup, but merely to provide an instrument for political mobilization under chosen circumstances. (6)

Initially, most Asian Americans during this time period were people of Chinese and Japanese ethnicities. Filipinos have lived in the continental America and Hawai'i for a long time. However, due to the history of the Spanish and the U.S. colonization, they were situated in an ambiguous political position. They were both Asian (or Pacific Islanders) and Hispanic; they were recognized neither as U.S. citizens nor as permanent residents, but as nationals. Since the 1970s, especially after the Vietnam War was over, there have been more and more people from other Asian countries immigrating in the United States, especially refugees from the Philippines, Korea, and Southeast Asia. The Asian demographics after the 1970s has drastically changed the concept of "Asian American." Not only have people of various Asian ethnicities fluxed into North America, but their ethnic-specific identification has challenged the politically correct "Asian American" as well as the landscape of Asian American culture. Historically, Filipinos and later-arriving Southeastern Asian refugees were not affected by the Exclusion Act in the 1940s, so their North American experience is also different from earlier Asian immigrants.

This fact indicates that pan-Asian identity no longer accommodates ANA members' identification based on their individual specific ethnicities. Espiritu notes, "Post-1965 Asian immigration has made it more feasible for some Asian American groups to secede. The new immigrants revive cultural traditions, reinforce national

differences, and remind co-ethnics of how little they have in common with other Asian groups” (*Asian American Panethnicity* 171). Although pan-Asian identity, or “Asian American,” is still pervasively used for political correctness, the internal segregation based on specific ethnic identities within the Asian minority group is gradually taking the place of pan-Asian collective identity. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling argue, “The term ‘Asian American’ implies a homogeneity of people and of purpose; in fact, it elides highly disparate peoples of different races and with diverse languages, religions, and cultural and national backgrounds” (4). Additionally, the term “Asian American” is “a literary sign and an abstract signifier whose signified contents are so shiftable, provisional, and undecidable that attempts to contain them will always result in incomplete narratives” (Lim, et al. 4). We should start to look at “Asian American” as “a multiplier signifier...whose significance in a literary and critical domain is at once capable of incorporating fresh immigrant subjectivities as well as recuperating historical multilingual texts” (Lim, et al. 4). The variegated Asian population has created heteroglossia in contemporary ANA literature. This inevitable literary evolution enables us to switch our scope to view ANA literature in a broader spectrum.

Additionally, opponents of collective identity, such as Epifanio San Juan, Jr., disagree with collective consciousness.³ They emphasize the importance of individual, ethnic-specific identity and argue that different ethnic groups experience racial discrimination and traumatic events differently; collective identity only generalizes

³ San Juan, Jr. argues, “Given the heterogeneity of the histories, economic stratification, and cultural composition of the post-1965 immigrants and refugees, all talk of Asian panethnicity should now be abandoned as useless speculation” (3).

racial sameness for a political end. I agree that individual ethnic-specific identity overrides collectivism. Internal ethnic specification and conflicts within different ethnic groups always exist among ANA members. In fact, more and more ANA members identify themselves based on their ethnicities instead of their collective racial identity. Although collective identity provides its political convenience to integrate ANA members' power in mainstream society, collective identity is after all a generalization that minimizes the diversity of different ethnic cultures and conveniences an egalitarian measure on account of the U.S. political end to include Asian minorities into multiculturalism.

Conscious of essentializing the idea of “Asian American” but unavoidably doing so, I define the term “Asian North American” in my dissertation based upon geographic location and similarities of cultural origin. Generally, “Asian” refers to countries in East and Southeast Asia, including China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and other countries within this geographical range. “North America” includes the geopolitical sites of the U.S. and Canada. “Asian North American” then refers to people of East or Southeast Asian descent who are either born and/or raised in the United States or Canada. Some critics include South Asia, e.g., India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, in the pan-Asian American collective identity. However, given that South Asia has its unique cultural traditions greatly different from East/Southeast Asia, I consider literature by writers of South Asian descent as another area of cultural and literary expression and thus do not include their works in my discussion.

According to Kandice Chuh, Asian North American literature has developed into a cultural practice that seeks to deconstruct different hegemonic discourses, especially discourses based on ethnic identity (Lim, et al. 4). Due to this resistance against political hegemony, stereotypes, and racialization, Asian North American writers dedicate themselves to inventing different narrative forms and strategies. One of the quintessential characteristics in ANA literature is its revolutionary challenge to meta-narratives. Chuh remarks, “A paradigm that acknowledges the limitations of meta-narratives of Identity and History, multiculturalism is often evoked as justification for fields like Asian American studies” (5). As one of the representative minority literatures in North America, ANA literature plays a pivotal role in undermining the dominant group’s hegemonic power that counters multiplicities of minority discourses and in subverting Eurocentrism that seeks to reestablish univocalized standards. This thesis also reflects my primary goal of engaging Asian North American literature as a means of overthrowing the Eurocentric tradition of cultural/literary studies in the academy.

ANA literature also accomplishes its goal of subverting and rebelling against any universalized standard in cultural and literary expressions. Asian Americanists Lisa Lowe, Shirley Lim, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Elaine Kim, King-kok Cheung, and Eleanor Ty have switched their attention to the diversity of Asian population in North America, as well as the multiethnicity and heterogeneity of ANA literature. Lisa Lowe states, “Asian American literary texts often reveal heterogeneity rather than producing regulating ideas of cultural unity or integration” (“Canon, Institutionalization, Identity” 53). She notes that as the components of Asian North American population have

changed, ANA literature has grown into incorporating people of more different ethnicities and social groups. Furthermore, she emphasizes:

Asian American literature *resists* the formal abstraction of aestheticization and canonization. If we evaluate Asian American literary expression in canonical terms, it reveals itself as an aesthetic product that cannot repress the material inequalities of its conditions of production; its aesthetic is not defined by sublimation but rather by contradiction, such that discontent, nonequivalence, and irresolution call into question the project of abstracting the aesthetic as a separate domain of unification and reconciliation. It is a literature that, if subjected to a canonical function, dialectically returns a critique of that function. (“Canon, Institutionalization, Identity” 54)

Lowe’s idea reflects that ANA literature aims to undermine any centralization; it disrupts the totalizing power of canonization and resists the rigidity of aesthetic standards set by the empowered authority. ANA literature is always changing and revolving with new paradigms, creating new forms and dialectics.

Extrinsically, the genres and narrative forms of ANA fiction have developed into a nonlinear, revolutionary, and experimental fashion. The narrative strategy tends to challenge generic stability and thematic limitation. The combination of autobiography, autoethnography, fiction, nonfiction, memoir, and many other genres represents the heterogeneity of ANA fiction. This polygeneric characteristic deliberately seeks to subvert traditional narrative patterns and invent different storytelling forms.

Major characters appear as first-person storytellers recounting their childhoods or their families in North America and/or in Asia. Ostensibly, the first-person narration follows the western autobiographical tradition in which the narrator “I” tells her/his life stories. Noticeably, not all the ANA novels that employ first-person narration are autobiographical, but they are more likely ethnographical, for ANA novelists use materials and incidents about their designated ethnic communities. For example, many works, such as Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, can be categorized as fiction, but at the same time they are also autobiographical, ethnographical, and historiographical.

The themes in Asian North American literature also become multifaceted. Not only do they deal with racial issues and historical trauma of racial discriminations that pioneering immigrants have suffered, contemporary ANA writers also include issues of Southeast Asian diaspora’s life (e.g., *Monkey Bridge*), ANA members’ sexuality (e.g., lesbianism in *My Year of Meats* and *This Place Called Absence*), concern about environmentalism in their works, young children’s awareness of homosexuality (e.g., *The Jade Peony* and *Blu’s Hanging*). By inventing new genres and themes, ANA fiction reflects the diversity and mutability of Asian minorities’ experiences that resist a singular form of representation. The narrative revolution subverts traditional definitions of genres and aims to create its own narrative flexibility.

In addition, language in texts blends with grammatical English, pidginized English, and the author’s native language. ANA authors deliberately use

“ungrammatical” English to characterize ANA members’ linguistic reality in the predominantly English-speaking society. Lack of English speaking ability limits most Asian minorities’ mobility in North America and their opportunity to explore the world outside their ethnic communities. On the other hand, ANA authors also aim to disrupt the hegemony of “Standard English” linguistic formality. For instance, despite the mainstream society’s perception of so-called “Chinglish”—English used by Chinese Americans, especially pervasive in Kingston’s and Tan’s novels—“as a shameful and broken language, rather than linguistically invigorating,” Evelyn Nien-ming Ch’ien argues, “Chinglish represents an aspect of Chinese American life. It is the language of the Chinese American diasporic moment” (106). Also, Chinglish is “a parody of English” and an “experimental features as signs of linguistic courage and independence” against the “Standard English” (Ch’ien 106). For the American-born generations who can speak both their mother tongue and English, this linguistic advantage provides them with the ability of code-switching between two different languages. In the examples of *Obasan* and *Blu’s Hanging*, novelists Kogawa and Yamanaka use Japanese language, pidginized English, and formal English to portray the linguistic reality of the Japanese minority characters in the texts and to depict the empirical events happening in their communities, namely Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans in Hawai‘i.

Intrinsically, some ANA fiction still maintains the matrilineal mother-daughter talk-story tradition in which mothers tell stories about their past in Old China (or any other countries of origin) to their daughters. Given that American-born or –raised

daughters are unaware of the traditional culture of origin, they rely on their mothers, who still carry with them the memories of traditional customs and languages, to learn about their cultural heritage. For the daughters, their country of origin, like their mothers, is the *Other* full of secrets and mysteries; these American-born or -raised daughters feel like part of the culture but in fact are distant from it. Through the mothers' talk-stories, the daughters know about their mothers' past and reconnect with the (m)other culture. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, this matrilineal narration establishes the tradition of Asian North American fictional writing. Subsequently, several ANA novels follow this matrilineal narration and deal with the mother-daughter relationship. For example, Chinese Canadian writer SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Japanese Canadian novelists Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), and Vietnamese American novelist Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* all portray the daughter's desire to find out their mothers' stories.

In the meantime, there is a new paradigm shift to reconnecting father and daughter. Some writers have turned their attention to the father-daughter relationship and grant fathers the voice that has been suppressed in history. Given that they have been oppressed by white racism and labor exploitation, Chinese male laborers have been taciturn about their sufferings. Some Asian North American writers attempt to figure out "what the fathers are thinking about" in order to reconnect this missing part of Asian North American history. For example, Kingston's *China Men* (1977) represents situations of early Chinese male laborers during and after the railroad

construction era through narratives by a daughter. In Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, the protagonist Leila's step-father, Leon Leong, is the central character that leads the readers back to the darkness of Chinese immigrant history of the United States. Jook-Liang's story with Wong Suk in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* also portrays this father-daughter transgenerational connection.

In addition, the characters' consciousness of their racial disadvantage in the predominantly white culture has been one of the recurring motifs in ANA literature. The rhetorical strategy of ANA authors always resorts to representing the racial tension between the disempowered minority and the hegemonic majority. The rhetorical agenda of ANA writers includes reviewing the historical trauma of a nation-state where Asian North Americans are involved and recollecting private traumatic memories of ANA members in their marginalized communities. Racial discriminations that contribute to political disempowerment of ANA members cause the traumatic experiences of the pre-1960s immigrants and continue to influence the subsequent generations. In particular, the review of public history and private memory has been an often adopted subject matter in ANA literature. For example, Vietnamese American authors, such as Lan Cao and Le Thi Diem Thuy, employ the relocation stories of the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States in their ethnographical novels.

Methodology: Trauma Theories

In terms of methodology, the theory of trauma foregrounds my major theoretical project to explore the symptoms of racial trauma, such as inferiority, melancholia,

silence, self-denial, or self-condemnation in these eight ANA novels. My purpose in applying the theory of trauma is not to testify to the rhetorical authenticity of trauma writing in ANA literature. The theory of trauma is an interdiscursive amalgam of various theories and disciplines that embraces not only psychoanalysis but also poststructuralism, theories of memory, body politics, and even neuro-psychology.⁴ Given that the theory of trauma and the nature of ANA literature are both heterogeneous and dialogical, my theoretical scope thus will rely not only on trauma theory but also extensively on different theoretical sources. In this section, I will briefly introduce the essentials of the theory of trauma.

Since early hysteria studies by neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, who studied the relationship between fright and neurosis in the 1870s, trauma has been widely studied in psychology-related fields since that time. Charcot's followers, Freud, Janet, and Breuer later concluded that hysteria is a condition of psychological trauma that causes patients to dissociate themselves from the reality because of the unbearable traumatic events in the past (Herman 12). In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) officially recognized post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as "outside the range of usual human experience" (Herman 33). Generally speaking, "characterized by an influx of excitations that is excessive by the standard of the subject's tolerance and capacity to master such excitations and work them out psychically" (Laplanche and Pontalis 465), trauma refers to the mental damage caused by the unpleasant events that an individual

⁴ Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart are two leading scholars of trauma in neuro-psychology.

experienced in the past. These events then settle into memories, which will periodically reemerge to the present in this individual's mind.

Regarding the mechanism of trauma, Sigmund Freud indicates that fixation on past intolerable experiences is called traumatic neurosis, usually caused "precisely at the present by the war" (*Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 340). As a Jewish intellectual who survived World War II, Freud witnessed how anti-Semitism and the Holocaust mentally and physically damaged humankind, especially the Jews. Freud himself and his family also suffered from the trauma caused by war and postwar turbulences. Ultimately, he was even forced to emigrate from his home country, Austria, to Paris in 1938 in order to escape from the Nazi's massacre. In his further study on traumatic neuroses, Freud explains:

In traumatic neuroses, and particularly in those brought about by the horrors of war, we are unmistakably presented with a self-interested motive on the part of the ego, seeking for protection and advantage—a motive which cannot, perhaps, create the illness by itself but which assents to it and maintains it when once it has come about. This motive tries to preserve the ego from the dangers the threat of which was the precipitating cause of the illness and it will not allow recovery to occur until a repetition of these dangers seems no longer possible or until compensation has been received for the danger that has been endured. (*Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 474)

When the dynamic of trauma has accumulated to a certain point, the energy stored in the consciousness has to be released through repeated symptoms. By analogy, like the eruption of a volcano, the excessive dynamic of trauma that accumulates in a victim's mind has to be released sometime in order to achieve a psychological balance. For trauma victims, even though the danger that causes trauma has no longer existed, they still constantly feel neurotically fearful that the danger will befall them again. Although trauma victims' reviewing traumatic moments can be considered as a kind of neurotic symptom, it is also a psychotherapy that can direct these victims to a healthy psychological state. Trauma victims routinely recall their traumatic memories from the past to the present. The periodical release of emotions, in this regard, appears to be a ritualistic mental healing.

In addition, trauma is psychological and somatic at the same time. Trauma transfers its symptoms from psychological reactions to somatic responses, and vice versa. This psychosomatic interaction illustrates that trauma, meaning "wound" in Greek, refers to not merely the external lesion of the body but also the internal infliction of pain resulting from chaotic moments. The internal injury "can continue to influence behavior long after the initial impact. Symptoms may surface belatedly and in disguised, often somatic, forms" (Farrell 12). Internal infliction, usually invisible from the appearance of human body, needs visible symptoms as evidence to prove it. Trauma is "not known in words, but in the body," and the pain, mental or physical, has to be decoded with words "because this wordless language is unintelligible to one whose body is not similarly affected, and because without words the experience has a certain

shadowy quality, a paradoxical unreality” (Culbertson 170). As the body ritualistically reflects certain symptoms caused by trauma, it also proves that “[t]he body is autonomous; it lives by its own laws; it has no need of a mind of tell it what to do” (McWhorter 157). Trauma victims cannot control when and how their bodies will respond to certain incidents that trigger their traumatic memories to resurface. In this sense, besides the actual written texts, the body also becomes the living text that reinscribes traumatic encounters.

One of the primary discussions in trauma studies is that traumatic memories usually reemerge in the form of nonverbal, filmic, fragmented, and episodic pieces—they are more visual and/or aural than verbal. As one of the influential clinicians in trauma studies, psychotherapist Judith Herman notes, “Traumatic memories have a number of unusual qualities. They are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story” (37). Instead, “[t]raumatic memories lack verbal narrative and contexts; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman 38). In order for people to comprehend trauma, writing about it becomes an important transcription from a visual or aural to a textual form. Trauma writing thus serves as the major medium to re-view traumatic events and personal stories about people involved in them, as Geoffrey Hartman notes, “Literary verbalization, however, still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and silence audible” (259). However, textualizing trauma has its problem of representing the “authentic,” as LaCapra indicates:

Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered. The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and future. (41)

There is a temporal delay between the time when trauma events initially occur and the time when trauma victims later retrieve their past memories. It is uncertain how long this temporal delay, or latency, might be and when traumatic memories would resurface to the minds of trauma victims. In trauma victims' consciousness, "[r]etrieved memories...may result in part from the imagination intervening to specify details, or even to create a sort of phantom reminiscence of what happened" (Hartman 261). In this regard, trauma writing is essentially composed of trauma victims' reediting and reimagining.

Given that traumatic memories are mostly nonverbal, in order to inform their audience of traumatic events, trauma victims have to materialize their memories by writing, hoping to demonstrate to the public about their suffering and to call for justice through their personal narratives. Through reviewing, rewriting, and retelling, different factors may intrude into this resurfacing process of traumatic memory and alter the original scenes of traumatic events. In terms of this particular transference of trauma from a visual/aural into a verbal/written form, Roberta Culbertson remarks:

Most disturbingly, bits of memory, flashing like clipped pieces of film held to the light, appear unbidden and in surprising ways, as if possessed of a life independent of will or consciousness. These undeniable presences nevertheless have an aura of unbelievability: though presenting themselves as clearly past, real, and fully embodied, they appear in nonnarrative forms that seem to meet no standard test for truth or comprehensibility. (169)

Culbertson agrees that the most effective method to understand trauma is through telling and writing about it. In particular, telling trauma is “a process of disembodied memory, demystifying it, a process which can only begin after memories have been remembered and the mystical touched by a buried self seeking its own healing” (Culbertson 179). Images or sounds of trauma are difficult to comprehend if there are no words or any written narratives that help translate them. In this regard, writing and telling are significant media that connect trauma victims and the audience of testimonies.

Judith Herman looks at trauma as a psychological symptom that can be healed via psychotherapy. She believes that by following techniques of psychotherapy, trauma victims can restore their “normal” lives without the disturbance of traumatic memories and reconnect their private memory with the public world. She points out:

People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling

and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom. (Herman 2)

Given that trauma victims cannot provide the complete truths of their stories, it is futile to testify to the authenticity of their stories. Instead, we shall look at the dialectic of trauma as to how and why trauma victims present their sufferings in certain ways that construct symptomatic meanings in a designated cultural or historical context. For instance, as ANA literature constantly represents racism in texts, racism-related trauma appears in various psychosomatic symptoms among Asian minorities. These symptoms reflect a discriminatory nature of a hegemonic government that persecutes Asian minorities in order to secure its Eurocentric power of domination. How and why the government discriminates against racial minorities also has to do with the political agendas and ideologies of a particular time.

One of the leading scholars in trauma studies, Cathy Caruth, establishes the theoretical basis of the study of trauma writing in terms of its significations in a socio-cultural context beyond a simple understanding of its pathological meanings. The concept of trauma as history indicates the intimate connection between historical events and the formation of trauma. Trauma and history adhere with each other, for trauma in different historical times can be interpreted differently. Caruth indicates, "History, like trauma, is never simply one's own...history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). Caruth agrees with Farrell, who comments that "trauma is a

kind of history” (14) because trauma exists to interpret the past. Caruth argues that existing in history, trauma allows us to rethink history not as what it is but as what it conceals. A simple, immediate understanding is not the single way to perceive history because trauma re-creates history and permits us to resituate historical (con)texts (11). Although hers is not a new approach, Caruth leads us to analyze the language in a text—“the story or the textual itinerary of insistently recurring words or figures” (5)—as a source to find out the root of trauma. In ANA literature, history is always an important backdrop of the stories that relates to the traumatic experiences of ANA members. The recurring representation of ANA members’ traumatic experiences reminds readers of what has happened in the past, but it also forecasts what might be happening in the future if we ignore the lessons in history.

Meanwhile, Caruth proposes an important look at the survival of trauma victims in that it is not just about victims’ inflictions but also about their survival with a mission to tell the “truth.” Namely, even though trauma dramatically changes the lives of victims, their survival provides them with a chance to recount their traumatic experiences to the public. Trauma victims’ survival signifies the intricate relation between self and other to the extent that they survive not only to tell their own experiences of witnessing the horror but also to inform their audience of stories of others who fail to survive. Therefore, trauma victims will continue to repeat their traumatic memories ritualistically if there is always an audience willing to listen to their trauma stories. In terms of the repetitive nature of traumatic memories, Caruth remarks:

Repetition...is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to *claim one's own survival*. If history is to be understood as the history of a trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own. (64)

I look at trauma victims' survival as a phantasmal, death-in-life existence for the others because the victims live to tell the stories of others. Through the victims' retrieval of traumatic memories, the audience may be able to understand possible causations of trauma. This concept applies well to white racism toward Asian North Americans, whose traumatic experience is represented in their literature and transferred to the next generations as a reminder of historical injustice.

* * * *

I discuss several different forms of ANA members' traumas in my dissertation. In the early twentieth century, Asian Americans' community Chinatowns have been labeled with negative stereotypes. The first, and also the most prominent form, is racialization and exoticization. Stereotypes often lead to racialization and ideological racism, which is defined as "the justification of inequalities through a set of controlling images that attribute physical and intellectual traits to racially defined groups" (Espiritu, *Asian American Men and Women* 101). Battling stereotypes thus becomes the major work in Asian North American cultural projects. ANA literature seeks to eradicate the mainstream society's stereotyping of Asian minorities. During the pre-World War II period, Chinese men were stereotyped as Charlie Chan or Fu Manchu; women were

Susie Wong, the Dragon Lady, and the China Doll. All these stereotypes contributed to “their cultural marginalization, political impotence, and psychic alienation from mainstream American society” (Espiritu, *Asian American Men and Women* 88). People in western society use biological differences to reduce Asian minorities to a uniform caricature and fail to see them as individuals. Mainstream society also generalizes ANA members based upon their cultural similarities. Because of this generalization, “all Asian Americans have been lumped together as if they were the same” (Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity* 159). ANA members thus fail to assert their individual ethnic distinctions, which are not always *the same*.

Double consciousness is probably one of the most familiarized kinds of stereotypes that plague ANA members. Presumably, ANA members struggle between their culture of origin and their desire to assimilate into mainstream culture. However, choosing either side is not the only option for them because they play different roles in a multicultural and multiethnic environment where a person does not have to accommodate his/her identity to the East-West, either-or dualism. In Chapter One, “Double Consciousness and Racial(ized) Trauma in Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*,” I discuss the long-standing issue of the Asian minority’s psychological struggle of double consciousness. I argue that this imposed dualistic consciousness between East and West, for the Asian minority, has become a racial(ized) trauma that results from an ideological dichotomization between East and West, constraining the identity of the Asian minority within the demarcation of the only two options. I propose that a multiple identity of racial minorities that suggests infinite

performative possibilities in a nation-state should be taken into account. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *Bone*, we can see the characters' struggle between Chinese traditional family value and their pursuit of individual freedom to assimilate into mainstream society. However, these Chinese American characters also seek to subvert the dualism of double consciousness that aims to restrict their identities. Instead of identifying themselves with either side, they seek to explore identificatory possibilities and apply multiple impersonations into their identification.

Another form of trauma, national trauma, associates wars with Asian minorities. In the mid-twentieth century, the United States' involvement in the Pacific wars reinforced people's stereotyping Asian Americans. For example, during World War II, after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, people in the United States and Canada expressed their overt discrimination against people of Asian descent, especially the Japanese. However, mainstream society generalized Asian Americans as a pan-Asian collective racial group without considering ethnic differences, so people viewed "Asian faces" as "enemies." Another important war is the Vietnam War. Vietnamese people suffered from the chaos of warfare in their own country. After the end of the war, some of them were relocated to the United States or Canada as a result of the Refugee Act. In a foreign land where language and culture are altogether different from their own, they struggle to survive their trauma of warfare while trying to accommodate themselves to a new living environment. During World War II and the Vietnam War, people's hostility against Asian minorities became more explicit in North America. Asians were generally described as the enemies to be vanquished. This anti-Asian sentiment during these

historical periods challenges North Americans of Japanese and Vietnamese ethnicities to question their cultural and national identities.

Chapter Two, “National Trauma and Private Memory: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*,” demonstrates how war causes trauma on the private body and memory of the victims. War victims collect and recollect traumatic memories repeatedly inside their bodies and minds as corporeal evidence of political persecutions. War is a national trauma that also infiltrates personal lives and causes losses, deaths, and ineradicable pain for the people involved in the chaos. In *Obasan* and *Monkey Bridge*, the characters retrieve their traumatic memories of wartime—World War II and the Vietnam War—and reveal the postwar living conditions of Asian-origin North Americans. In these two deeply trauma-laden novels, the authors provide their subtle descriptions of humanity during traumatic moments and the mother-daughter reconnection. Not only are these two novels highly autoethnographical, but they are also historiographic to the extent that they use personal narratives to comment on the influence of historical events. Aimed to counter the “truths” presented in public history, the personal narratives in both novels reveal the unbearable truths within the private family history of war victims and depict the trauma of ANA members under the influence of warfare.

In addition, childhood experience is also an interesting perspective to understand trauma of racial minorities. In Freudian psychology, childhood plays a crucial part of an adult’s personality and psychological foundation, for what happens in a person’s childhood influences his or her formation of ego. Since children have a different view

of reality from adults, their perception of racial reality deserves our attention. Rocío G. Davis points out, “Asian American Childhoods enact subjectivity through a complicated mesh of dispositions, associations, and perceptions that are represented through a singular selection and ordering of the accounts of events and persons who have played important roles in their distinct processes of selfhood” (166). Children’s perception of reality is constantly changing and adjusting, but whatever they believe in childhood will carry with them into adulthood. If childhood generally suggests a significant period of time for people’s perception of the relation between their selfhood and their living environment, minority children may perceive racial tensions in their lives more sensitively and responsively than children of the dominant group because minority children are well aware of their own racial difference.

In Chapter Three, “Melancholia and Childhood Traumas in Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* and Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*,” I discuss children’s perspectives on melancholia and loss, as well as their racial identification. In both novels, the child narrators experience the trauma of loss, understand the change of life caused by the external social, economic, political factors, and follow the rites of passage to adulthood. The procedure may be painful, but these child characters gradually understand contingent variations of human life. Their development into maturity exhibits that they finally relieve their mourning and/or melancholia over the loss of loved ones, integrating their lives into the reality and formulating their subjectivity and sense of ego. The authors use a child’s point of view to look at the multiethnic environment and offer his/her critique on racial discriminations in the hostile

mainstream society. I discuss the effectiveness of using children's viewpoints to portray traumatic experiences of themselves and of others, as opposed to the adults' perspective to look at traumatic events in the past. I conclude that cultural assimilation is inevitable. Minority children can easily accommodate the diversity of a multicultural environment with their multiple identities.

As the spectrum of ANA literature expands, a variety of themes are generated. ANA writers seek to incorporate people and cultures around the world into their literary production. They settle in North America and use their literary creation to connect North America with the rest of the world. This new paradigm in ANA literature illustrates that its scope becomes transnationalized with a global perspective that breaks the geopolitical limitation of a specific nation-state. Transnational culturalism looks beyond the traditional nationalism of literature and reflects Deleuze and Guattari's idea of rhizome:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*....Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (25)

With the development of multinational corporations and global networking, geopolitical boundaries have been breached. This globalization also reflects in cultural and literary productions that indispensably interconnect with one another. If the globe is composed

of multiple plateaus, all the cultural productions that happen on the surface of plateaus are acculturated and enmeshed. Geopolitically, as the global migration and Internet technology have advanced in the world, to maintain cultural purification in a singular nationalist ideology is no longer possible because cultural exchange is meant to take place. This understanding alerts ANA writers to look at issues that concern not only people in North America but those who face the same issues around the world.

In Chapter Four, “Female Trauma and Transnational Connections: Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* and Lydia Kwa’s *This Place Called Absence*,” I explore transnational feminist concerns about women’s trauma of violence. The characters in the novels encounter the trauma that challenges their idea of femininity. Traditionally, a female-gendered body is always associated with reproductivity. The female characters in the novels suffer from infertility, but their existence also shows that a female body should be redefined beyond the biological function of reproductivity by the heteronormative standard. With the shared experience of physical violence caused by domestic and environmental abuse, these women characters cross temporal and spatial boundaries and reflect global concerns about the autonomy of a female body. The spatial and temporal boundaries are broken by the female connection regarding their shared experience of trauma and a reconsideration of the female body beyond its biological circumscription.

Asian North American literature is historically marginalized in mainstream society due to its non-Western origin with different literary and cultural traditions. As mentioned earlier, because of an uneven distribution of power and resources, accesses to ANA literature have been limited for the reading public. Traumatic experiences of

Asian North Americans thus became neglected, forgotten in society. By presenting this project, I hope to arouse the public's general interest in recognizing trauma presented in ANA literature and acknowledging how an Asian minority's body creates different meanings historically, politically, and socio-culturally.

CHAPTER 2

DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND RACIAL(IZED) TRAUMA IN JADE SNOW WONG'S *FIFTH CHINESE DAUGHTER* AND FAE MYENNE NG'S *BONE*

Trauma studies critic James Berger asserts that trauma theory has great value in the study of history or historical narrative (572). As trauma theory develops into a hermeneutic discourse, it also invites interdisciplinary discussions of personal narratives and testimonies in anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies. Trauma theory is significant in analyzing personal narratives embedded in historical grand narratives and socio-political context “as the verbal representation of temporality” (Berger 572). Whether in a verbal or textual form, trauma writing bridges the gap between the past and the present, between public history and personal memory. Like Kirby Farrell, who views trauma both “as a clinical concept and as a cultural trope” (14), James Berger also concurs that trauma “allows for an interpretation of cultural symptoms—the growths, wounds, scars on *a social body*, and its compulsive, repeated actions” (573, italics mine). This idea is particularly crucial when scholars locate racial issues represented in minority literature. The public history mandated by the dominant culture manages to rewrite the body of racial minorities in society, but this body always shows resistance against this totalizing force that aims to reconstitute the identity of racial minorities.

This chapter discusses double consciousness as a racial(ized) trauma to the Chinese American characters in Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993). The narrators in the novels recount their personal stories about Chinese immigrants in San Francisco's Chinatown. Mixed with historical narratives of immigration politics in the United States, these personal stories portray the Chinese minority's identity issue and their sociopolitical status in mainstream society. Situated between Chinatown and American society, the characters in the novels develop double consciousness in their cultural identification. I argue that double consciousness is a racialized trauma that demarcates the possibilities of racial minorities' identification. The identity of racial minorities is a fluid concept in which their multiple cultural agencies subvert the East-West ideological dualism.

Narrated by a third person "Jade Snow," who is also the namesake of the author, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is an autobiographical novel about a successful Chinese American woman in San Francisco's Chinatown during the 1950s. In the novel, the narrator Jade Snow talks about her childhood and strict upbringing by her immigrant parents. Jade Snow experiences unequal treatment because of people's prejudices against her gender and race. These prejudices also hinder her from pursuing her college education and applying for jobs outside Chinatown. However, all these difficulties never stop her from achieving her goals of success. As one of the first Chinese Americans admitted to Mills College, Jade Snow is initiated by the knowledge regarding her individuality as a woman and the racial/cultural difference between her and her white counterparts. Although she tries to assimilate into mainstream culture, she

still finds it difficult for a member of racial minority to be accepted by the discriminatory dominant society. Later in her life, inspired by her art class at Mills, Jade Snow eventually starts her own career as a ceramic artist. Her unyielding personality makes her overlook racial and gender obstacles and become a successful artist.

Compared with *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* is a deeply trauma-laden novel depicting the story of a Chinese American family, the Leongs, in San Francisco's Chinatown. Regarded as a novel that demonstrates the type of "the more canonical novels of mainstream American modernism," *Bone* is "far from documentary realism or autobiographical straightforwardness" (Izzo 137). More specifically, the novel is based primarily on the author's talented literary imagination and discerning social commentary about the relation between Chinatown and mainstream society. In the novel, the first-person narrator as well as the oldest daughter of the family, Leila Leong, recalls the family trauma about the suicide of her middle sister Ona, who kills herself by jumping off from the roof of a Chinatown housing project, the Nam Ping Yuen. Through Leila's narration, this trauma is revealed layer by layer in her flashback memories. These memories portray the Chinese laborers struggling to survive in Chinatown, their pursuit of, and disillusionment with, the "American Dream," and the conflicts between parents and children, between Chinatown and mainstream society. After being abandoned by her husband Lyman Fu (Leila's birth father), Leila's mother (Mah) remarries Leon Leong in order to legally stay in the United States. Leon and Mah work hard, hoping that the family can stay strong, and the children can eventually pursue a better life in the future. Unfortunately, Ona's death

brings traumatic impact on the family. All the Leongs choose separation or escape to pursue their individual freedom and avoid conflict or blame. Moving away from San Francisco to New York, youngest daughter Nina first becomes a flight attendant and then leads tours to China to pursue her own individual life without interferences of family issues. Leila herself also moves out of Chinatown at last to start her new life after marrying the Chinatown boy, Mason Louie. As for the father Leon, his shipping job allows him to sail overseas like a sojourner to eschew all the disturbances that happen between him and Mah. After Ona's death, Leon decides to move into the San Fran Hotel and lives like a bachelor. In the end, Mah is the only person who stays in Chinatown to take care of her baby clothing store.

Generally speaking, double consciousness is a mental condition based upon the either-or dualism believed to exist in racial minorities due to their struggle between their culture of origin and mainstream Euro-American culture. Asian Americans are placed in a dualistic frame by the dominant society's racial politics that regulates their choice of identification. Yet, human consciousness is always in a non-static and fluid state, so it is unlikely to fixate on a certain end. Inasmuch as there are only two options in double consciousness, racial minorities feel in a dilemma when no other alternatives are proffered to them. If they turn to identify with mainstream society, they would feel guilty as if they were betraying and abandoning their cultural origin. Regarding double consciousness of African Americans, W.E.B. Du Bois asserts:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul

by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (11)

Du Bois indicates that double consciousness places racial minorities in a passive position where their identity becomes an object to be defined. His rendering of double consciousness, however, still follows the dualist reasoning that emphasizes the concept of “two”—one way or the other, with no way out. Theoretically, double consciousness has its dialectical fallacy because its dualistic scope fails to represent multiple social performances of racial minorities and explore the potentiality of their multifaceted identities.

Regarding the dilemma of double consciousness, Asian American critic Elaine Kim comments, “For the American-born Asian, the ‘choice’ between Asia and America was false because it was in reality a choice between yellow and white. When ‘Asia’ was chosen, it was because ‘American,’ or white, doors seemed closed” (*Asian American Literature* 58). Although she dismisses this dualism and suggests that Asian Americans obliterate this choice between the two, she fails to offer a better alternative to this issue. Besides, Kim’s statement seems to imply Asian Americans’ reluctant acceptance of “Asian” as their racial identity when the mainstream “American” identity is not open to them. Namely, “Asian” is chosen by the Asian minority not because they *want* to, but are *forced* to. “Asian” identity, in this sense, seems to lose its value or becomes a secondary option, while “American” identity is always the top priority.

Resisting the binarism that regulates Asian Americans' identity, Tina Chen applies performance theory in her book *Double Agency*, proposing that we look at Asian Americans as double agents who perform different speaking and acting subjects. She suggests that the double agency is "a sign of the multiple allegiances that Asian Americans have maintained in order to construct themselves as agents capable of self-articulation and -determination" (Chen xviii). That is, instead of viewing them as passive objects who have limited identification with their existence under dualism, Asian Americans are active subjects and acting agents of their presence in society. Therefore, the "double" in Chen's term is pluralized as not just "two" but "many." Instead of falling into the either-or dualism, Chen uses the politics of impersonation to explicate the Asian minority's "performative possibilities," in which Asian Americans possess their racial agency malleable to "im-personate themselves, to perform themselves into being as persons recognized by their communities and their country" (xx). Their presence should not be demarcated by ideological racialization; their identity should be considered variable, imaginative, and able to explore different possibilities. Chen also argues that there has been a general misinterpretation of Asian Americans' social roles in history. Asian Americans are thought to impersonate different personas in society as imposture. For example, Asian Americans are often portrayed as inassimilable aliens or inscrutable spies because of their difference in culture, language, and lifestyle. Asia's involvement with several important wars in the twentieth century also reinforces these already-existent stereotypes of Asian Americans in mainstream

society. The derogatory, passive image of Asian Americans needs to be erased, for they are active subjects, impersonators, and intercultural agents in American society.

Double consciousness is also related to the dualism in western culture that defines the human race based on white/color dichotomization. The dominant group racializes non-white races based on prejudices and stereotypes. The notion of racialization refers not only to the biological generalization of the physical features of non-white people, but also to any cultural production by them. As Robert Miles defines it, racialization is “a dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to a general category of persons which reproduces itself biologically” (76). Miles claims that racialization is a process of essentialization from the perspective of white superiority towards the people of other racial origins, such as Africans or Asians, to categorize them based upon their skin color and non-Western cultural practices. It is the Caucasian perspective to differentiate Self from Other based upon superficial biological features and cultural differences. For white supremacists, non-white races are the exotic Other to be objectified and stereotyped—their subjectivity is nonexistent and their material presence is determined by the social values set by the white. When these racial minorities immigrate to a Western-cultured host country, their presence and their communities are liable to be exoticized and racialized.

Traumatic experiences of minorities are also racialized. In most cases, racial trauma is socio-culturally constructed. There is no innate trauma for any given racial minority, but Asian Americans are often associated with certain traumatic experiences.

For example, people generally assume that Asian women have no individuality and live in a subjugated situation. This image of Asian women has been widely accepted by mainstream audience and reinforced by Caucasian writers, such as Pearl Buck, who depicts Chinese women's situation under her western eyes.⁵ However, not every Asian woman follows the same situation. Another example is that early Chinese immigrants experienced the trauma of racism, such as Exclusion Laws that denied the entry of Chinese immigrants into America during 1882-1943, Anti-Miscegenation Laws that banned interracial marriage between Chinese men and white women while Chinese women and children were prohibited to enter America, and other bureaucratic racial discriminations. Asian Americans come in many different ethnicities. Some later-arriving immigrants do not share the same racial trauma as those early Chinese and Japanese immigrants. However, they are assumed to share the same experiences because of their racial similarities. This is what I call "racialized trauma" of Asian North Americans: one can identify an experience as a sign of racial trauma, but this trauma may not be applicable to all ethnicities in this race.

Another way of racialization is to perceive Asian American texts as a representation of the writers' designated ethnicities. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *Bone* both employ first-person narration, a practice associated with autobiographical writing. Autobiography, a literary genre originating in the western Christian tradition of confession, tells personal stories in many different forms. Some autobiographies are

⁵ In her two major novels *The Good Earth* and *Pavilion of Women*, Pearl Buck depicts her version of Chinese women as so weak, vulnerable, and lacking individual autonomy that they need Christianity to liberate them. Her depiction of Chinese women has become a racialized image in the American white

composed as *Bildungsromane*, in which the narrator experiences numerous life situations and learns lessons from particular incidents. Although autobiography is meant for telling the truth, autobiographers can accentuate the positive and avoid the negative of their lives, or fictionalize their life stories. Many minority writers use their personal life experiences as material for their writing. Even for fictional writing, they often use first-person narration to depict the traumatic experiences of suppression and discrimination of their racial/ethnic group in a white-dominated environment. Such first-person narrative strategy, however, tends to be generalized by mainstream readers as a common writing style that delineates collective traumatic experiences of racial minorities. Especially when readers are unfamiliar with a particular minority's culture, literature written by or about this minority becomes a reference book for the reading public to locate this minority's culture.

When Frank Chin comments on Maxine Hong Kingston's "fake" Chinese history and her representation of Chinese Americans in her books, Kingston responds, "I'm just writing a memoir, like Proust." She is not obligated to represent her knowledge of Chinese history in her writing; instead, she intends to reinvent and reimagine her version of Chinese history in her creative writing as opposed to the "standard" historical discourse. However, because of her racial background, Kingston is compulsorily expected to represent all Chinese Americans to reflect the authentic Chinese history. Her identity as a writer is thus racialized, and her autonomy as an artist is violated and constrained. The problem of racialization rests on its inability to view an

readership. Because of the ignorance of ethnic difference, the readers may also generalize *all* Asian

event or a traumatic experience as an individual encounter. Therefore, it takes much effort for minority writers in a predominantly white society to claim their individuality through writing and to rectify the fallacy of racialization.

Minority writers can use first-person narration in their literary expression to describe minority characters, community, or culture. However, even though minority writers sometimes do not mean to write an autobiography, their work tends to be labeled as autobiographical because of this first-person narrative technique. This reception results in textual racialization of minority writing. On the one hand, minority writers aspire to have their voice of suppression heard by writing about it; on the other hand, their literary production and their personal experiences, in this respect, are racialized and fail to be considered as an individualistic expression of their literary imagination. Under these circumstances, the ethnic background of Wong and Ng becomes the distinctive marker of their writing. Their writings are categorized as (auto)ethnographic texts. Such ambivalence creates a problem to minority literature because the racial/ethnic identity of writers overrides their literary talent and becomes a token that fails to represent them as creative writers. As a result, the trauma represented in minority literature is also considered as a racialized experience.

Chinatowns as Traumatic Sites

Loaded with numerous traumatic experiences and pain, whether collective or individual, Chinatown becomes an epicenter of trauma for the Chinese American

women as having the same subjugated situation.

characters in the novels. As the backdrop of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *Bone*, San Francisco's Chinatown has been viewed as a marginal terrain within the mainstream Anglo-American society. Because of their socio-cultural importance for Chinese immigrants, the Chinatown is used as a central site in many Asian North American novels, such as New York's Chinatown in Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, San Francisco's Chinatown in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, and Vancouver's Chinatown in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*. Historically, Chinatowns are not only socio-politically complicated enclaves within the xenophobic dominant power, but they are also culturally hybridized locations between East and West, between traditional Confucian doctrines and liberal western individualism. Earlier Chinese immigrants mostly came from the southern provinces of Canton (Kwangtung) and Fukien in China. Although outsiders look at Chinatowns as the microcosm of "Old China," it is erroneous to assume that everything in Chinatowns equates with what is actually happening in China. What earlier Chinese immigrants commonly share, however, is racial discrimination and injustice that secluded them into a socially disadvantaged and politically powerless position.

Historically, Chinatowns developed into closed-off neighborhoods in which Chinese immigrants could find comfort in interacting with people from a similar cultural background. Additionally, Chinese immigrants could not find a job outside Chinatowns because of racial discrimination and prejudice against them in mainstream society. Given that job opportunities were restricted, Chinese immigrants started

businesses inside their own communities. In terms of the social formation of Chinatowns, sociologist Zhou Min indicates:

Because of the need for social and cultural support from fellow sojourners and the need to maintain ethnic identity and kinship ties with China, immigrants chose a way of life in Chinatown that reminded them of home. This voluntary self-isolation created a stereotype of unassimilability that in turn reinforced the community's irrelevance to the larger society. (40)

Not only have Chinatowns been labeled with negative images, but people living in Chinatowns have also been stereotyped. For example, the Hollywood movies portray Chinese women as “gentle geisha or China Dolls—servile, submissive, exotic, sexually available, mysterious, and guiding; or as Dragon Ladies...lacking in the emotions or the neuroses of real women” while Chinese men, especially characters like Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu, have been stereotyped as “effeminate and emasculated on the one hand, but inscrutable, sneaky, stoic, and sometimes wise on the other” (Prasso xiii).

Besides, Anne Anlin Cheng points out:

Chinatown as a geographic formation, after all, grew out of economic and racial segregation, and its subsequent revival is founded on the economy of tourism, an excursion through the specularization of “Oriental style.” [...] “Chinatown” as a tenacious exercise in and engagement with Asian stereotypes can be seen not only in its architecture but also in its self-presentation to the public and to the

nation. [...] Chinatown as a business and a community fostered economic opportunities by profiting from and encouraging certain racial stereotypes that were clearly crippling in other ways. (37, 38)

Cheng remarks that people's stereotypes and fantasies of Chinese immigrants make Chinatowns appear mysterious and outlandish. Although other Asian ethnic groups also established their own communities in the mid-twentieth century, such as Japantowns, Koreatowns, Manilatowns, or Little Saigons, Chinatowns have still been holding their importance as the major commercial and cultural centers for Asian immigrants.

Additionally, since most Asian immigrants live and work within Chinatowns, the ability to speak English does not appear to be a necessity in their lives. The language barrier not only blocks their interactions with people outside Chinatowns but also creates another stereotype as being inassimilable aliens, not fully American. As a result, the mainstream society's unfamiliarity of the Asian minority and their culture causes many misconceptions. Lisa Lowe points out:

“Asia” has been always a complex site on which the manifold anxieties of the U.S. nation-state have been figured: such anxieties have figured Asian countries as exotic, barbaric, and alien, and Asian laborers immigrating to the United States from the nineteenth century onward as “yellow peril” threatening to displace white European immigrants. Orientalist racializations of Asians as physically and intellectually different from “whites” predominated especially in periods in which a domestic crisis of capital was coupled with nativist anti-Asian backlash,

intersecting significantly with immigration exclusion acts and laws against naturalization of Asians in 1882, 1924, and 1934. (*Immigrant Act* 4-5)

Lowe suggests that the segregation laws of the U.S. government have led Asian immigrants to limit themselves to Chinatowns. For earlier Chinese immigrants, in order to preserve their traditions and lifestyles on the one hand and defend against the external aggressive political force on the other hand, a cultural interstice arises between Chinatowns and American society.

As they encounter discrimination and prejudice, Asian Americans develop complicated psychological reactions, which can further turn into a form of repressed grief and grievance. Based on Eurocentric ideology, being American usually suggests Caucasians able to speak fluent English and practice Judeo-Christian traditions. Racial difference, cultural practice, and language barrier deter Asian Americans from being recognized as full American citizens. While trying to assimilate into mainstream society, they also have concern about losing their cultural heritage. Cheng calls this psychological repression “racial melancholia” (xi), which she associates with a dynamic of rejection against the hegemony of white power and internalization of shame and anger inside the psyche of the racial other (xi). Sufferers of racial melancholia may lose their racial identity, which is “imaginatively reinforced through the introjection of a lost, never-possible perfection, an inarticulable loss that comes to inform the individual’s sense of his or her own subjectivity” (xi). While suffering from double consciousness, racialization, and melancholia, racial minorities reinscribe their trauma

through mental repression, silence, or other psychosomatic symptoms. Under the complicated feelings of shame and anger, Asian Americans resist hostile external forces in silence. Rather than using violence to protest against racism, they establish their own communities in order to find comfort and protection.

The narrators of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *Bone* contextualize their Chinatown as a site of security, yet a source of racial(ized) trauma. Growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown, the characters stand at the intersection between two cultures and experience cultural conflicts between East and West. Due to this ambivalence, they suffer from the psychological dilemma of double consciousness. Wong and Ng both present their characters' strong sense of inextricable melancholia and internal anxiety with the consequences of racial discrimination against, and exclusionary policies toward, Chinese immigrants. Whereas Ng explicitly portrays the traumatic experience of the Chinese immigrant family, Wong appears evasive and implicit in describing her narrator's traumatic experience of herself and her family. In the life situations of these narrators, leaving Chinatown is an alternative for them to survive their trauma and a means of relieving their burdening pain, but in so doing, there seems to be a guilt equated with denying their traditional Chinese cultural heritage and assimilating into the mainstream western social mores.

In addition, both novels address social issues of Chinese immigrants in America. Ng focuses more on the socio-psychological impact on the Leong family in her novel, while Wong concentrates on the narrator Jade Snow's anxiety to assimilate into mainstream society and to pursue individual success. Irrespective of the varying

directions in their writings, these two Chinese American novels equally represent the material reality that the Asian American body is a racialized product of social order and national ideology. Wong and Ng both contend that their race, though biologically predetermined, should not be socio-politically confined, and that social imposition of double consciousness on Asian Americans is a racialized trauma. Therefore, one should reassess the causation of trauma not based solely upon the factor of race, but also upon various socio-political factors that impact each minority individual.

Although I propose that we should regard the characters' encounter of trauma in the novels as individual experiences that occur in the same socio-historical context, my intention here is not to overemphasize individuality over collectivity in terms of racial experiences. It is undeniable that collective experience sometimes does exist within the same racial minority group on account of their shared immigration routes. The fact that *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *Bone* both reveal the commonality of Chinese immigrants is not a coincidence. Double consciousness illustrates this collective experience inflicted on Chinese Americans. Racial discriminations, stereotypes, anti-miscegenation, and various exclusions also occurred to other immigrant groups in the early twentieth century because of the host country's xenophobia. However, for other immigrant groups from Europe, such as Jews, Italians, or Irish, their cultural backgrounds are so similar to the Caucasian-based mainstream society that they can easily integrate and assimilate into it without making any substantial adjustment and struggle. Discrimination persists among Asian immigrants on account of their physical

differences and non-western cultural practices, which collectively reflects in the situation of the Asian minority.

When minority writers account for their views on racism *only* for the sake of collective ideology, they circumscribe the possibilities of their identities. They fall into ethnocentrism and even self-racialization that requires conformity and denies other alternative voices. In this sense, they create the same homogenizing totality as mainstream society does. Although individual experiences should be valued equally with collective experiences, double consciousness has long been regarded as a collective racial(ized) trauma of the minorities. Generally, the racial hierarchy in mainstream society illustrates the power imbalance where the white is superior to the minorities. On the one hand, the minorities always seek to climb up to the top of the social ladder and assimilate into mainstream society in hopes of gaining the same power, as they believe that gaining success is gaining power. On the other hand, they feel guilty at having to sidestep their cultural heritage and minimize their raciality. While assimilating into mainstream society, they risk being seen as followers of white supremacy and cultural traitors; when they earn their success, they are accused of taking advantage of their racial identity. Such a dualism confuses and traumatizes minority members generation by generation. Is there a middle ground for ethnic minorities to locate? Can they create a neutral, flexible space other than East and West, outside the dualistic frame of double consciousness?

Fifth Chinese Daughter

Since its publication in 1945 and its inclusion in the 1970s as one of the pioneer Asian American books written by women, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* has received polarized criticism. Frank Chin regards it as an “autobiography-as-propaganda,” arguing that Wong’s book racializes Chinese Americans and orientalizes the people of Chinatown. He also claims that her text promotes white supremacy and perpetuates stereotypes of Asian minority in the United States (25-26). Even recently, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is still compared with other Asian American writers and misread as a “bad example” that represents the exoticized image of Asian American women. Some critics claim that Wong romanticizes the traumas of her own life and other Chinese Americans, which further reinforces white Americans’ racialization of Asian Americans.⁶ However, Karen Su remarks, “The enduring value of reading *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is that it does offer us a useful text with which to understand the context of segregation that shaped Wong and her contemporaries” (17). Wendy Motooka comments that Wong has suffered from the “violence of representation” because Wong’s self-representation “conflict[s] with ‘our’ collective critical expectations” (208). The emphasis of “our” in the quote refers to Wong’s collective identity as a Chinese American. Like Kingston’s case mentioned earlier, Wong is expected to reflect her collective obligation for her racial/ethnic group and conceal her (Americanized) individuality. I argue that the castigation of Wong as a cultural traitor and her book as propaganda is an overstatement and dialectically reductive. Since an individual’s political stance is personal, Wong has

the total *author-ity* to express her personal political view in her book. Wong's personal freedom should not be confused with the assumption that she intends to disavow collective values of her ethnicity.

Reviewing this novel historically, readers can identify the correlation between the reception of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Asian American identity politics. In the 1950s, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was assigned to be read in elementary and high schools. It was even translated into many languages to trumpet worldwide the American value of “melting pot,” “multiculturalism,” and the “American Dream.” Because there were not many books written by Asian Americans during the 1950s, in order to incorporate the Asian minority into the agenda of “melting pot” and multiculturalism, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was a convenient commodity (or token) appropriated by the government for its political purpose. Recent studies relate *Fifth Chinese Daughter* to the U.S. politics of the 1990s when multiculturalism was highly advocated.⁷ Since the “melting pot” agenda in the 1950s, Jade Snow Wong's success model as a Chinese American woman has made her the “model minority” icon by mainstream society. In the 1990s, the U.S. government advocated “multiculturalism,” and *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was revived by the government to promote ideology of multiculturalism. Given Wong as a member of racial minority, her example was used to illustrate that race or gender would not interfere with one's success.

⁶ See Patricia Lin Blinde's “The Icicle in the Desert: Perspective and Form in the Works of Two Chinese American Women Writers.” *MELUS* (1980): 51-71.

⁷ Karen Su, Leslie Bow, and Wendy Motooka relocate *Fifth Chinese Daughter*'s historical background and analyze how it was appropriated as a text to advocate the U.S. government's political propaganda in different periods of time.

Although Wong claims that everyone can become successful despite racial and gender prejudices, her individual achievement is actually a rare case. What she fails to see is that racial and gender differences do contribute to an individual's success or failure. Wong seems to assume these factors are simply general difficulties people will encounter in their pursuit of success. We should not deny Wong's personal endeavor and perseverance, which lead her to success, but we also cannot overlook that her success was sometimes based upon white patronage. For instance, in the novel, Jade Snow was admitted by Mills College, not only because of her strong academic performance, but also because the president Dr. Reinhardt "has had a lifelong interest in the Oriental people" (*FCD* 147). In order to help Jade Snow finance her college education, the dean of undergraduate students also offers Jade Snow a place to stay and a housekeeping job in her home "Kapiolani." When she starts her pottery career after college, Jade Snow is patronized by the white tourists who appreciate her work not because of her great craftsmanship but because of her "exotic" presence—a young Chinese woman who exoticizes ceramics. These patronizations embody the power relation that the white are superior, able to provide needs to the less powerful, i.e., the non-white minority. Whether Jade Snow is conscious of this or not, her success is useful to the political agenda of the time. Jade Snow's success is best viewed as an individual case, not as a universal example.

It is impossible to know whether Wong's story serves as political propaganda. However, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* does depict the author's internalized trauma.

Although Wong does not directly reveal her traumatic experiences in the novel, they can still be detected between the lines. Leslie Bow suggests:

To read Jade Snow as one who has negotiated an acceptable “middle way” between Chinese and American cultures is to ignore the discomfort of the author’s textual voice and the repressive structures this discomfort uncovers. This very uneasiness between *Fifth Chinese Daughter’s* narrative conflict and resolution might testify to a text that, at the time, could not have been written (174).

I postulate that Wong’s strategy of the third-person narration implies the symptom of her double consciousness. Growing up in Chinatown, narrator Jade Snow has been struggling between the private and the public spheres—her traditional Chinese family and American society. This struggle reflects in the narrator’s conflictual position. What accounts for the author’s switch from the traditional autobiographical “I” to the third-person “she” in the novel? One might argue that Wong’s use of the third-person narration can be thought of as a subversion of, and a resistance against, the first-person autobiographical tradition. However, her use of third-person narration might be a traumatic symptom, displaying the self-awareness of her identity as a racial *other*.

In the beginning of the novel, an omniscient narrator introduces how Jade Snow’s parents emigrated from China to the Gold Mountain: “I tell the story of their fifth daughter, Jade Snow, born to them in San Francisco” (*FCD* 2). Although this “I” only appears once in the novel, this “I” in the introduction becomes an ambiguous character. It is hard to posit who this “I” is; it is not an autobiographical “I” but rather a

storyteller meant to be omniscient and objective. As author Wong claims that the novel depicts most of her real-lived experiences of growing up in Chinatown and pursuing education and career, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* can be legitimately viewed as an autobiographical novel. Presumably, the author Wong transforms herself into an omniscient storytelling “I” to tell the stories of Jade Snow and her family.

In the western literary tradition of autobiography, even though the speaking subject in the text is first-person, this subject is still disengaged by the autobiographer as an object to be narrated. In other words, the autobiographer splits him/herself into two: the one who writes and the other to be written about. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, if Jade Snow the protagonist is represented as a third person, supposedly this protagonist is considered as the racial *other* that the author attempts to distance from, even though this racial other is also the author’s *self*. This split can infer the author’s awareness of her identity as a racial other in mainstream society, from which she does not see her speaking subject as a central “I” but as an estranged, *narrativized* object to be re-presented and interpreted. Perhaps, Wong intends to fictionalize her life, for the third-person narrator is metaphorically further away from the authorial/autobiographical “I” as if she were writing about someone else.

In the introduction to the 1989 edition of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Jade Snow Wong wrote: “The third-person-singular style in which I told my story was rooted in Chinese literary form (read: it reflects cultural disregard for the individual)...I have nonetheless maintained my psychological detachment from my personal importance” (*FCD* vii). The psychological detachment from her individuality makes Wong abandon

the autobiographical “I” and instead choose the third person narratee “she” to represent herself. Wong is self-conscious that as a minority writer, she is racially different from Euro-Americans. Instead of following the western autobiographical tradition, she writes about her own life in a different strategy. Her desire as an author still persists: she wants to re-present her life, remembering all the traumatic moments she has gone through and all the successes she has accomplished. To some extent, this complicated split of self reflects Wong’s flexible characterization of her narrator (or her self), who has multiple identities.

Karen Su argues that Wong’s novel presents “a graphic case of an imprisoned ‘I’” (31). It shows Wong’s fear and inferiority of using the speaking subject “I” to represent her racial, female *self* in the text, as Su explains:

Recognizing the repression of her “I” opens up a way to read the text as a record of Wong’s own submission to the dominant ideology of Confucian patriarchy. While a recuperation requires to identify resistance as a sign of Wong’s conscious critique of the ideologies by which she is interpellated, reading the text as a record of her subjugation is a strategic interpretation that identifies the precise ways in which Wong has adhered to the dominant discourses that dictate her subjectivity. (32)

This symbolic imprisonment not only suggests Jade Snow’s constraint by patriarchal ideology, but also reflects Chinatown’s exclusion from the outside world, which justifies the patriarchal legitimacy to confine women and children within this cultural

domain. In the novel, Jade Snow's father owns a garment factory in Chinatown, and he hires mostly Chinese women to work for him. Jade Snow describes her father's belief in gender equality: "While most Chinese women in San Francisco still had to conform to the Old-World custom of staying at home, her father believed that according to New-World Christian ideals women had a right to work to improve the economic status of their family" (*FCD* 5). Although Jade Snow's father seems sympathetic to Chinese women's situation, it is in fact the capitalist legitimation of exploiting Chinese American women to work both in their own households and in the factories of Chinatown. Since women's physical mobility is limited, their economic possibilities are also restricted. They have to depend on the businesses and industries in Chinatown to support their families. Therefore, even though they can work outside the house, they still lack economic autonomy. In this sense, like most Chinese women, Jade Snow's "I" is imprisoned and subjectless. In order to reinvent a dominant narrator in the novel, Wong utilizes the third-person "she" to take the place of "I."

Jade Snow describes her father's contradictions and double standards in the novel, but she respectfully avoids making any direct judgment on him. She also eschews criticisms on her father because she is afraid to defy Chinese patriarchy, which would arouse a tremendous attack from her people. The unchallengeable patriarchal authority in Jade Snow's family is the social microcosm of Chinatown. In addition to his patriarchal authority, Jade Snow's father exemplifies how the blend of Chinese and American cultures can influence an individual's thinking, causing inevitable contradictions in East-West cultural hybridization. Her father represents the typical

patriarch, who gives the orders to the family: “Every time at dinner table, the father’s announcement is final—there is no discussion” (*FCD* 33). Even though Jade Snow’s father is determined to maintain Chinese customs, his tendency to acculturate Western values is evident in the novel. For example, as a converted Christian, he buys turkey for the family to celebrate the American holiday and allows his children to call him “Daddy” because he likes the sound of affection. Ironically, he shows little affection to his daughters. Though he represents a typical Chinese patriarch, Jade Snow’s father is a by-product in the interplay of two cultures. Her father claims, “[A]ll Chinese children in America should learn their ancestral language, and one did not dispute one’s father if one were a dutiful little girl taught to act with propriety” (*FCD* 4). This concept reaffirms his family status with patriarchal authority. However, young Jade Snow has started to sense contradictions between the two dominant cultures in her life. At school, “[t]he introduction of a group standard which differed from her home teaching was perplexing to Jade Snow, but she concluded that it would be easier to conform to group action than to enter a one-voice argument against it” (*FCD* 20). Jade Snow describes that her childhood memories are mostly about Chinatown life; her world was “almost Chinese, for her world was her family, the Wongs” (*FCD* 2). She learns that collective values of a group or a family are more important than individual opinions. Collective value, like patriarchal authority, represents the inviolable Law of the Father that represses individuality. Likewise, minority ideology also emphasizes the dualistic decision of collectivity over individualism. Hybridized values enforced by her father

also make Jade Snow develop double consciousness, which forces her to vacillate uneasily between the East-West cultural dichotomies.

Besides, when Jade Snow asks her father for financial support of her college education, her father rejects it because he does not find it necessary for a Chinese girl like her to go to college. According to her father, her family's financial situation can only support her brother to go to college. It may be an excuse out of a sexist Chinese patriarch, who undervalues women's education. Her father's refusal to support Jade Snow's college education also fails to follow his words that "education was the path to freedom." If Jade Snow were a boy, the situation would have been different. This gender bias triggers Jade Snow's ambivalent feeling toward her Chinese ancestry in her pursuit of individuality. Faced with the rejection by her father:

[Jade Snow] was trapped in a mesh of tradition woven thousands of miles away by ancestors who had had no knowledge that someday one generation of their progeny might be raised in another culture. Acknowledging that she owed her very being and much of her thinking to those ancestors and their tradition, she could not believe that this background was meant to hinder her further development either in America or in China. (*FCD* 110)

Although she finally manages to financially support herself through college, her father's refusal makes her realize that prejudices against the female gender would always become an obstacle to her pursuit of success either in Chinatown or in mainstream society. Also, Jade Snow's father is selective of what he would like to believe and what

he thinks appropriate for his children. Oddly enough, Jade Snow still portrays her father as “the only one who shows no partiality between daughters” (*FCD* 93). She overtly presents her father’s contradictions but never judges him negatively.

Jade Snow’s story indicates a blind spot that her success model only focuses on the final product but minimizes the hardships and injustice during the process. Indeed, her ultimate success is a canopy that romanticizes her traumatic experiences. In the novel, Jade Snow depicts her experiences of encountering racial and gender prejudices, but she diminishes this traumatization without making further comments about those unpleasant experiences. For instance, she encounters her first racial discrimination by a classmate named Richard in her elementary school. When Richard insults her with racial slurs: “Chinky, Chinky, Chinaman,” Jade Snow “consider[s] the situation and decide[s] to say nothing” (*FCD* 68). Jade Snow’s calmness provokes Richard, who then throws an eraser at Jade Snow as a physical attack. Faced with this astonishing racial discrimination, Jade Snow mitigates her traumatic experience with the thought of the superior Chinese culture:

Everybody knew that the Chinese people had a superior culture. Her ancestors had created a great art heritage and had made inventions important to world civilization—the compass, gunpowder, paper, and a host of other essentials. She knew, too, that Richard’s grades couldn’t compare with her own, and his home training was obviously amiss. (*FCD* 68)

Jade Snow uses her pride of Chinese culture to dismiss Richard's ignorance. She minimizes this unexpected humiliation and places herself in a superior position to overlook Richard's racial discrimination. Although she claims that she would never make any judgment on people's certain characteristics (*FCD* 68), this racial discrimination, however, internalizes her shame and fear into silence as a measure of self-defense.

Another incident of racial prejudice happens in Jade Snow's job interview. It is a general misconception that Chinese immigrants refuse to assimilate into mainstream society and choose to live and work inside their own community. In fact, during the 1950s, mainstream American businessmen refused to hire people of Asian descent. Because of their racial difference, Chinese immigrants were relegated and unable to find a job outside Chinatowns. In the novel, Jade Snow mentions that in an interview, the interviewer condescendingly tells her, "If you are smart, you will look for a job only among your Chinese firms. You cannot expect to get anywhere in American business houses" (*FCD* 188). Moreover, he points out that racial prejudice on the Pacific Coast is "a great handicap" to her job interviews (*FCD* 188). However, rather than feeling defeated by this racist reality, she again returns to her Chinese culture that "had created a great deal of favorable interest, and because of its cultural enrichment of her life she would not have traded her Chinese ancestry for any other" (*FCD* 189). Like a talisman, Chinese culture protects her from racial prejudices and discriminations. Jade Snow's hard-earned success is at the cost of her psychological suffering from the prejudice against her gender and race in her own family as well as in the hostile mainstream

society. Such dependence on Chinese heritage appears to provide momentary comfort to Jade Snow's traumatized soul, but the discomfort of traumatic experience from racism still lingers in her psyche.

Throughout the novel, Jade Snow constantly struggles with her double consciousness between collectivity and individuality. Elaine Kim comments that Jade Snow has been fighting for "her often enraged struggle to attain individual definition apart from her family and her acceptance of attitudes popularly ascribed to the Chinese American minority during her era" (*Asian American Literature* 66). On the one hand, Jade Snow's racial difference limits her access to the white society, but on the other hand, she resists traditional Chinese collective values. For most native-born Chinese Americans, Chinese culture is a familiar yet indirect cultural input. Chinese culture appears to be the mother culture for them, but it is also a (m)other culture, the one on the other side of the Pacific that they have to rely on their elders to gain knowledge from. Their contact with Chinese culture is secondhand. In the novel, Jade Snow mentions that she has been expected to learn Chinese culture since childhood. Although she has never been to China, her knowledge about it is indoctrinated by her father and her Chinese instructors. In her life, Jade Snow has always been reminded of her racial otherness. This fact indicates that racialization of minorities is prevalent and sometimes inevitable, for their individual presence with distinct racial markers is always linked to their different cultural background in mainstream society. For Jade Snow, the return to her Chinese heritage seems to desensitize her to the perceived inferiority of her race. The internalization of her racialized trauma brings her back to her Chinese cultural

heritage as a psychological healing. This return to her (m)other culture also reflects the internal conflict of her identification between the self (American) and the *other* (Chinese). Jade Snow takes pride in her Chinese cultural heritage as she shows great respect and decent knowledge of it, but her struggle of trying to fit into mainstream society in her college years also represents her dilemma of this cultural identification.

A particular incident in her father's garment factory describes Jade Snow's awareness of her racial otherness and her sense of alienation. Knowing that Jade Snow's father owns a garment factory, her sociology professor suggests a field trip to observe the manufacturing in her father's factory. As the class walks around in the factory, Jade Snow describes, "[T]he Chinese women workers stared at the young, healthy Caucasian girls just as curiously as the students stared at the native costumes and the Chinese babies who played and napped comfortably as their mothers worked" (*FCD* 110). What the class stares at is not the contrast between home factories and large-scale factories, but class distinctions in a racialized setting—the working-class Chinese seamstresses in a Chinese-owned home factory under the gaze of their white counterparts. As a bilingual agent, Jade Snow has to translate the conversations between her father and her class. At that moment, she feels, "Although everyone seemed more or less at home, the parents as well as guests, Jade Snow suddenly felt estranged, for while she was translating conversation between instructor and parents, she was observing the scene with two pairs of eyes—Fifth Daughter's, and those of a college junior" (*FCD* 165). As a mediator between two cultures in this setting, Jade Snow feels isolated and confused. She observes the interactions of two cultures, but she belongs to neither side. She is part

of the class, but her racial difference is prominent among her Caucasian classmates, who see Jade Snow as part of this home factory. Her father's lack of English ability accentuates his social status as a non-English speaking immigrant. Class distinctions presented in this particular setting make Jade Snow realize that she is after all a daughter of a Chinese immigrant and will never belong to the mainstream group.

Jade Snow's frustration reveals her sense of estrangement and exclusion from mainstream society. When her classmates congratulate her for being chosen to read her comparative essay on Chinese novels and western literature at an English conference, Jade Snow feels, "How could she tell them that for a year she had been watching and listening with wonder to catch every moment and sound of these Caucasian girls who participated so easily in the college scene, who absorbed and contributed while she remained a mere spectator? Now at last she too could claim to be a participant" (*FCD* 166). Situated between her Chinese ancestry and her American education, Jade Snow feels stranded in the dilemma of assimilation and identity crisis. However, she also realizes that it is imperative to find alternative identities beyond Chinese and American. The alternative identities are supposed to have unrestricted flexibility and explorable possibilities.

In Chinatown, Jade Snow gradually learns to appreciate her cultural heritage and play different personas in different social settings without being determined by formative socio-ideological laws. At a young age, Jade Snow has wished to be "more than an average Chinese or American girl" (*FCD* 108). She learns that her father's traditional Chinese doctrines have constrained her from pursuing individual freedom.

Initiated by the theory of sociology she learns at college, Jade Snow understands, “I am an individual besides being a Chinese daughter. I have rights too” (*FCD* 125). Though western philosophy influences her thinking, she does not intend to completely discard her Chinese discipline. Instead, she realizes that “the foreign philosophy also was subject to criticism, and that for her there had to be a middle way” (*FCD* 130-31). Jade Snow’s search for middle ground demonstrates her rejection of dualist determinism and her preference of eclecticism at the crossroad between East and West. Her middle way is exemplified in her changed attitude after attending Mills College:

Jade Snow no longer attempted to bring the new Western learning into her Oriental home. When she entered the Wong household, she slipped into her old pattern of withdrawal, and she performed her usual daughterly duties—shopping for Mama, household chores, writing business letters in English for Daddy—in the role of an obedient Chinese girl. But now she no longer felt stifled or dissatisfied, for she could return to another life in which she fitted as an individual. (*FCD* 168)

This example does not aim to reinforce Jade Snow’s double consciousness, but demonstrates the self-consciousness of her role in the two cultures. She has found negotiation and respect between her two cultural inputs. When she works as a maid, she observes the life and value of middle-class American families from an outsider’s point of view. In her own community, Jade Snow can also remain a critical observer. For instance, in her Fourth Older Sister’s wedding, she does not feel like a participant; instead, she feels “more like a critical spectator” (*FCD* 143). She pays attention to

people's interactions and traditional customs at the wedding ceremony, from which she is aware of the family hierarchy and the position of the bride as "a sort of decorative, noneating, nondrinking, nonspeaking accessory to the wedding celebration" (*FCD* 144). Jade Snow can thus distance herself and critique her own cultural heritage from a third person's perspective.

Jade Snow's race and gender have been the obstacles that stop her from moving forward, but she never lets them determine her destiny. On the contrary, she looks at her race and gender as her advantages to pursue success. She identifies herself with both East and West, but after a long time struggling and oscillating between the two, she understands that choosing either side does not secure her identity. She will not be like her parents, who, born and raised in Old China, know about Chinese culture, or like her sisters, who eventually go to China to teach; her racial difference can never make her become her white counterparts. She explores all the possibilities to incorporate her personal interest in arts and pottery. Even though critics attack her self-Orientalization that helps her succeed, Jade Snow's racial difference gives her the opportunity to realize the values of impersonation free from any stereotypical, racialized identification of an individual. Su contends, "[R]ecognizing that Wong's relationship to Chinese ethnicity is assimilationist not because she identifies with Chinese culture *per se*, but that she identifies with it in the ways prescribed by American assimilation, opens up the possibility to affirm rather than negate Asian ethnicity within the formation of Asian American identity" (22). Namely, Wong uses her racial alterity as a strategy to achieve her personal goals without having to abandon her racial identity. Historically and

politically, her racial difference makes her suffer from discrimination and prejudice, but this fact also enables her to question social injustice and to stratify her identity into heterogeneous facets where multiple impersonations are possible.

Bone

In *Bone*, the private family story of the Leongs is enmeshed with the public history of U.S. politics of Chinese immigrants during the 1940s and 1950s. Fae Myenne Ng adopts this historical context to present racial melancholia of this Chinese American family. Asian American scholar Thomas Kim remarks that *Bone* illustrates “how contemporary Chinatown politics and culture have developed from the historical specificity of location, economics, and legislation; the encounter with the ‘Other’ in this ethnic text is also an encounter with a specific history of dominations and resistances” (42). Indeed, the Leongs represent life obstacles of a typical mid-twentieth-century Chinese immigrant family in San Francisco’s Chinatown. For example, when he first arrived in America, the father Leon could not find a job because of his ambiguous identity and the language barrier. Given that he has no actual biological relation to his adoptive father Grandpa Leong, Leon’s legal papers become an important reliance and proof for his fake identity, as he says, “In this country, paper is more precious than blood” (*Bone* 9). His American identity is constructed by all the legal papers that he collects in his briefcase. This identity politics shows that paper materializes an individual’s corporeal presence in America, while a human being with flesh and blood does not qualify for legal existence in the country. All his life spent in Chinatown, Leon

has been dedicated to pursuing his “American Dream.” He tries to start his own businesses, but he fails at both his grocery store and dry cleaning business. At last, his favorite second daughter Ona kills herself for unknown reason. For him, this “American Dream” is the most tragic, traumatic irony.

The daughters in the Leongs suffer from the dilemma of double consciousness on different levels. The protagonist-narrator Leila attempts to identify herself with the Chinese cultural heritage, but she realizes this impossibility because she is too far away from this seemingly familiar yet foreign culture about which she tries to learn from her parents. She is envious of her youngest sister Nina, who has the chance to go to China, finds a Chinese boyfriend named Zhang, and has direct contact with the genuine Chinese culture instead of the simulated “Chinatown” culture. Leila narrates, “I thought about our different worlds now: Nina had a whole map of China in her head; I had Chinatown, the Mission, the Tenderloin” (*Bone* 28). To a certain extent, Leila is envious of Nina, but she also identifies herself strongly with Chinatown, a place where she can feel a sense of belonging and where she can indulge herself in those Old-China family stories. However, families in the Old-China stories are so abstract and distant that she feels detached from them, as Leila narrates:

Mah and Leon forced themselves to live through the humiliation in this country so that we could have it better. We know so little of the old country. We repeat the names of grandfathers and uncles, but they have always been strangers to us. Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history. To us, the

deformed man is oddly compelling, the forgotten man is a good story,
and a beautiful woman suffered. (*Bone* 35-36)

Leila's ambivalence for her Chinese heritage represents her sense of loss and the estrangement from Old China, as Chinese culture is disrupted by the western influence on American-born generations. Leila understands that it is impossible to retrieve the lost cultural heritage. For her, "Chinese" only represents her ethnicity but does not represent the cultural ideology she learns by cramming Old-China stories in her mind and following traditional practices. More precisely, "Chinese" is only one persona of the multiple identities Leila plays in American society.

Double consciousness disturbs the psyche of racial minorities as they have to constantly move back and forth between two different cultures and languages. This repeated switch between the two realities also challenges their formation of identity. Like Jade Snow in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Leila is not only a narrator-protagonist but also a translator-interpreter for her own family and the immigrant families at work. As an education counselor in a Chinese school in Chinatown, Leila is in charge of counseling and mediating the conflicting ideas that immigrant parents have between Chinese concepts and American values. Since these parents do not speak English well enough to communicate in the English-speaking society, Leila has to deal with ideas of two cultures and "translate" the American educational ideals to these immigrant parents who are still ideologically accustomed to "the Chinese way." Under these circumstances, Leila is not only translating two different languages but also two

different ideological systems. She plays a cultural mediator in this particular cultural milieu. Regarding Leila's translation, Frederick Aldama claims:

Leila's bilingual and double-class consciousness gives her potential access to many private, secret Chinatown places, allowing the reader a degree of access into this private world. She continually moves in and out of public/private spaces as she retells and translates the story. [...] Leila, then, exists on the linguistic border between insider and outsider as she "bridges" the gap between different spaces—making for a multi-lingual imagination. (96)

Leila's interpretation work represents the bridge between Chinese and English, between native-born Chinese Americans and their immigrant parents, and between Chinatown and American society.

The process of translating is similar to the retrieval of traumatic memories, for victims recall their traumatic experiences from the past to the present through reconstituting and reediting memories. Likewise, translators use their imagination and linguistic competence to reconstruct syntax and semantics from the source language to the target language. During this process, the translator's emotion is simultaneously involved and translated *into* the final product. For trauma victims, to tell the truth is their responsibility and to repeat traumatic experiences is ritualistic. They need to survive to tell the stories and they also need to tell the stories to survive (Laub and Auerhahn 63). Ona's death is mentioned in the beginning of the novel, but the traumatic stories behind her death are revealed little by little through Leila's narration. Leila's

trauma is reflected by the way she deals with Mah and Leon's mourning of Ona's death, and the police's legal inquiries into Ona's life history. The flashbacks of Leila's memories take readers back to "both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*" (Caruth 153). This incomprehensibility of truth about Ona's suicide becomes Leila's responsibility as a narrator and an interpreter to decipher, "to speak *for* others and *to* others" (Felman 15).

Readers may notice that "[a]lthough Myenne Ng uses only one voice, the narrator Lei's, readers hear other voices through her sensibility" (Kafka 52). As a first-person narrator, Leila not only articulates her inner thoughts but also translates multiple voices of others. With the authority of a narrator and a translator, Leila "translates" to her audience the cause of Ona's suicide. When Ona dies, Leila is the first person to be notified this news and thus receives the strongest impact of this unexpected loss. Situated between her family and the police, Leila translates what the police say in English to her family into Chinese (Cantonese). In addition, Leila also has to "translate" Ona's death to the police and her parents. This verbal translation also transmits the message of the dead to the alive. When informing her parents of Ona's death, Leila witnesses the emotional breakdown of her parents and reexperiences the impact of this trauma. In the constant switch of two languages in translation, Leila also edits and screens the information about Ona to her parents. Leila admits that she did not translate to Mah the part that Ona was on downers and other details about Ona's life "because by then I was all worn-out from dealing with death in two languages" (*Bone* 14). Leila is also self-conscious of the languages she speaks out as if they were foreign from her

body; she writes, “I felt the shock fresh, hearing the news out of my own mouth, all mixed up in English, Chinese” (*Bone* 143). For Leila, Ona’s death is like prelinguistic *other* in trauma; to describe this trauma through languages, Leila is not only translating the pain of her own, the pain of her parents, but also the permanent incomprehensibility of Ona’s death.

Like a psychic, Leila speaks on behalf of Ona based on her assumption and understanding of Ona’s life. While Leon and Mah are trying to figure out why Ona kills herself, Leila would rather believe that “it’d been Ona’s choice” (*Bone* 16). Believing that Ona killed herself by choice relieves Leila’s sense of guilt for being unable to attend to her sister and take care of her pain. However, no one can retrieve the real reason for Ona’s suicide. Leila knows that Ona was on Quaaludes, which gives readers a clue that she was probably on drugs, unconscious of what she was doing when she jumped off from the building. Leila infers that the cause of Ona’s suicide may come from the inner struggle between her individual pursuit of love with her boyfriend Osvaldo and her obligation of being an obedient daughter for Leon. After Osvaldo’s father, Luciano Ong, runs away with the money that Leon invests on dry cleaning business with him, he forces Ona to break up with Osvaldo. Leila believes this dilemma contributes to Ona’s depression and suicide. Her parents’ ignorance of Ona’s depression also gives Leila a convenient reason to blame Ona’s death on them.

Bone is not an autobiographical novel, but it demonstrates the first-person narrator Leila’s confession, for she feels a deep sense of guilt for failing to save her sister Ona from dying. In Leila’s memories, Ona always internalizes her suffering in the

dark and chooses silence to cover her personal problems, as Leila narrates, “Ona got used to keeping everything inside, to holding the seeds of herself secret from us, and we got used to her shadowy presence” (*Bone* 119). Ona’s silence does not suggest her passivity in dealing with her difficult life situations. Instead, her silence can be seen as a self-defense against the pressure of double consciousness. Because she can never be the “typical” Chinese daughter, following family obligations and expectations of her father, Ona refuses to yield to the social patriarchal force that restrains what she can or cannot be. Like the No Name Woman in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* who jumps into the family well with her baby as a silent protest and escapes from all the public humiliation she does not deserve, Ona’s suicide represents her last resort to protest against the locked-out condition of her life.

However, for Leila, silence is not an option. As a trauma victim as well as a translator, Leila has to recollect her sister’s life and constantly suffers from the visions of Ona’s jumping. As Elaine Scarry remarks, traumatic pain is stored in the memory of traumatized bodies where the “self-immunizing antibody system is sometimes described as a memory system: the body, having once encountered certain foreign bodies, will the next time recognize, remember, and release its own defenses” (Scarry 110). The repetition of traumatic memories becomes a routine in the lives of trauma victims. In her recollection of Ona’s life, Leila can only relate to those events that she fails to handle well. For example, Leila remembers a childhood episode where she scolded Ona without asking the reason once she found Ona in her ruined dress, hiding herself in the bathroom crying. Faced with Ona’s death, Leila condemns herself and continuously

repents for her negligence of her sister. Leila feels, “I thought I knew Ona. She was the middle girl, the in-between one. I thought she was some kind of blend of Nina and me, but I had no idea it was such a dangerous mix. Now I feel that I should have known, that I should’ve *said* something that might have anchored her” (*Bone* 51). Ona’s in-between situation in this context illustrates her dilemma of double consciousness because she cannot be Leila, who tries hard to follow the traditional Chinese decorum as an eldest daughter to please Mah, but she also cannot be Nina, who leaves home far away to pursue her individuality. Ona also struggles between her individual pursuit of love and Leon’s disapproval of it. Tugged between two options—“one of paternal prescription, the other of her lover’s claims” (Kafka 55), Ona resists both and chooses *her* way—suicide. After Ona dies, Leila describes her regret: “I want to open my arms wide as a fireman’s net; I want to sweep over her whole life and comb out all the sadness that made her do it. Like Leon and Mah, I went over every moment I had with Ona and tried to find my own moment of failure” (*Bone* 106). All through the novel, Leila depicts her illusions of seeing Ona fall and collapse. Leila’s mind vacillates between her conviction that Ona kills herself by choice and her failure to notice Ona’s suicidal attempt. Leila recalls the night Ona ran away with Osvaldo. Leon tried to stop Ona, and they ended up having a big fight on the street. Seeing Ona ride in Osvaldo’s car and leave, Leila writes, “It was only one swift moment of light, but it lasted long enough for me to see Leon looking after Ona as if he was watching everything he’d ever hoped for disappear” (*Bone* 175). Leon was devastated to see Ona gone, but this scene

also devastated Leila. Reluctant to see Ona suffer, however, Leila felt glad to see Ona “escape” because it is “[w]hat Leon searched for, what Ona needed” (*Bone* 150).

Critic Phillipa Kafka posits that *Bone* is “an allegory” (51). Indeed, Ona’s death is highly symbolic on many levels. First, her death is a symbolic sacrifice, condemning the racialized double consciousness and the injustice of social system toward the female gender. Kafka claims that Ona’s suicide is related to gender asymmetry in cultural constructs. Her suicide illustrates her resistance against the patriarchal system that frames her self-identification, as Kafka argues:

[T]he loss of Ona as daughter and sister reflects the price of the traditional system’s abuses, not only in her sacrifice of herself, but in the varying responses of each of her sisters and of her father and mother. Had there been no gender asymmetry, had there been no cultural constructs about the nature of gender roles—what is appropriate or inappropriate—Ona would not have died. Furthermore, the members of her family and community members who also loved her would not have suffered. (55)

Kafka contends that Ona’s death is ascribed to the traditional patriarchal subjugation that restricts women’s choice of personal freedom and mobility. For example, Leon never allows Mah and his daughters “to leave Chinatown without permission,” for he believes that Chinatown is the only safe place for them. This spatial restriction creates not only physical immobility but also psychological immurement for women in Chinatowns. As a daughter in a traditional Chinese family, Ona is expected to overlook

her individuality and follow the expectation of her family. However, unable to work through double consciousness, Ona chooses suicide to end this conundrum. Besides, Ona's suicide is a metaphor of Leon's broken "American Dream." Leon comes all the way from Hong Kong to America with a fake identity in order to find a better life. Though his two businesses in America fail, he is still optimistic about his life in America. He spoils Ona over Leila and Nina, hoping that Ona will someday succeed in the land of promises, but Ona kills herself eventually to claim Leon's one more failure. Ona's suicide represents Leon's shattered American Dream, like Ona's broken bones from the fall.

Ona's broken bones are also associated with Leon's failure to ship the bones of his "fake" father Grandpa Leong back to China as Grandpa Leong requests before he dies. The collecting and shipping of ancestors' bones to China has been a respected custom for earlier Chinese immigrants, for they value significantly the ancestral continuum and cultural tradition that they have to go back to where they come from after death. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, there is a passage about gathering bones:

When Chinese immigrants had died in the United States, they were considered to be buried here only temporarily. In six or seven years, their family associations automatically arranged to have their bones dug up, boxed, and returned to their closet relatives in China, where they would be permanently reburied in their family grounds. Thus, limited areas of association-owned American ground were freed for burial of subsequent dead. (*FCD* 84-85)

For the “oldtimers” in Chinatown, the Chinese “have a heavenly weight, and that [their] fates can be divined by the weighing of [their] bones” (*Bone* 153) and “blood came from the mother and the bones from the father” (*Bone* 104). This cultural belief explains how patriarchal fatalism is connected to the materiality of a body. The bones construct the major framework of the body. If we use the body as a metaphor for the wellbeing of a family, then the bones suggest the strength and support inside the family. Rather than shipping Grandpa Leong’s bones back to China, Leon buries them in a local cemetery. After the city government redistricts the cemetery, he can no longer relocate Grandpa Leong’s tomb to find his bones. Because Leon fails to ship the ancestor’s bones to China, Leon and Mah believe that Ona’s death is a punishment by Grandpa Leong for their unfiliality and profanity to their ancestors. Grandpa Leong’s lost bones are parallel to Ona’s broken body; collapsed and shattered into pieces, her suicide not only changes the materiality of her body but also traumatizes her family.

Bones also suggest the continuum of cultural heritage from one generation to another. In terms of this Chinese tradition of bone shipment, Kafka suggests, “By the very act of titling this book *Bone*, then, the author is reconnecting with her ancestry. She is paying her respect through historic referentiality to her cultural traditions, at the same time that she is undertaking to show how the old and the new can be syncretized” (53). In *Bone*, the Chinese ancestry is a missing cultural link that the American-born characters seek to reconnect and identify with in their lives. The “lucky generation”—Leila, Ona, and Nina—are the culturally hybridized agents of American and Chinese cultures. Even though they lack the deep understanding of “bone,” the idea of ancestry

and cultural heritage, the Leong sisters are still forced to accept their innate ethnicity, and expected to continue their cultural heritage and follow family obligations. Besides, in Leila's childhood memory, Mah used to cook pigeons; she asked her children to clean the meat and suck the bones because the bones are the sweetest part of the food (*Bone* 31). In this sense, bones are also related to the affection, the sweetness, and an inseparable affinity of family.

Although Chinatown is a site of traumatic memories, it is also the “over-protective, mother-like” home to earlier Chinese immigrants (Aldama 92). In *Bone*, Leila feels misplaced when she is not in Chinatown, as she says, “Something about the staying in the Mission felt like I was crashing out at somebody else's place. I guess that's when I decided: Salmon Alley felt like the only safe place” (*Bone* 120). In her narrative, she constantly reveals her nostalgia, but she also realizes that this nostalgia is just an illusion that keeps holding her back. After marriage, Leila decides to move out of Chinatown and start a new life with her husband Mason. However, the night before she moves out of Chinatown, she has a sudden inclination to stay, as she describes, “These sounds were comfortable, and for a moment, I was tempted to fall back into the easiness of being Mah's daughter, of letting her be my whole life” (*Bone* 193). Leila also recalls Ona's feeling about leaving Chinatown: “She never felt comfortable, even with the Chinese crowd that Osvaldo hung around with; she never felt like she fit in” (*Bone* 173). For Leila and Ona, staying in Chinatown makes them feel “cocoon-safe” (*Bone* 129). All the three Leong daughters are eager to leave Chinatown, but only Nina

makes her way to New York. Leila and Ona both feel stranded “in the middle of all the trouble” (*Bone* 139) of their family.

Even though Chinatown is a geopolitical site in North America, the spatial possibility and cultural hybridity have constructed itself into heterogeneous cultural space. Aldama argues that Chinatown for the first-generation Chinese immigrants is still “heavily gendered” because Chinese men try to restrict women and children inside Chinatown for safety reason. However, “[t]his does not mean that the Chinatown women are entirely restricted. They often reimagine—derestrict—their mundane everyday lives by imbuing Chinatown places with multiple layers of value” (92-93). He observes that Chinatown can be stratified into many spatial meanings. For example, in *Bone*, Leila describes the restrictive condition in the elevator of The Nam Ping Yuen, the building from which Ona jumped, but such claustrophobic space embodies “Leila’s inhabitation of a border between the artificial and the imaginative and Ona’s escape through the annihilation of all space” (94). Besides, after Ona is cremated, Mah moves Ona’s ashes from the mantle to the sewing table, and then to the top of the television. Even though the house is a limited space, Mah demonstrates the possibilities of this domestic sphere that is mobile and fluid without spatial constraints.

Given that Chinatown has developed into a heteroglossic site as its cultural value becomes more and more acculturated, the fluidity of this cultural space furthermore explicates the way people redefine their kinship. The family structure of the Leongs illustrates the erosion of the boundaries in traditional biological relations. For example, Leon is the “paper son” of Grandpa Leong, who helps Leon come to America

with forgery document papers. Also, Leon is not Leila's biological father, but their father-daughter relation is thicker than blood. In the beginning of the novel, Leila urgently searches for Leon because she wants to him to be the first person in the family to know the news about her unannounced marriage with Mason. This move illustrates the mutual trust and strong emotional connection between Leila and Leon. Besides, curious about her birth father's whereabouts, Leila expects Leon "to bring back something from this meeting with [her] father—a word, a picture, an expression—something that would unlock [her] from Mah, this alley, Chinatown" (*Bone* 184). At the end of the novel, Leon does find Leila's biological father, Lyman Fu, who left for Australia and abandoned Mah and Leila. Although Lyman Fu regrets having abandoned them, his apology is simply a spell of an exorcism that Leila tries to do to obliterate the ghostly image of her biological father. Compared with this biological relation with no emotions involved, Leila and Leon's father-daughter relation breaks the biological boundary and reinforces a strong relation based upon affection and mutual support. It is the solidarity of a family that matters more than blood relation. No matter how far he sails away for work, Leon always comes back home after a long journey overseas. Leon tells Leila: "[W]hat we hold in our heart is what matters. *The heart never travels*" (193). The family structure of the Leongs deconstructs the concept of blood relations, which no longer suggest any legal significance. Similarly, an individual's last name does not signify any biological connection between two people, for names, like identities, can always shift. What unite a family are emotional bonds, not blood relations.

One specific incident shows Leila's determination to explore an identity beyond double consciousness. Mason Louie, Leila's fiancé and then husband, is a typical Chinatown boy who holds a strong sense of pride of his Chinese ancestry. Mason never likes his cousin Dale because, according to Mason, Dale is "too white" (45). Dale hardly speaks any Chinese; he went to all white school and English is the only language he speaks. Though Dale has a successful career and a great house in the suburbs, Mason finds him completely Americanized and despises him for his missing Chineseness. Mason has a strict view of being Chinese. For him, as long as people have Chinese blood in their bodies, they should carry their cultural heritage and mother tongue instead of abandoning them in order to fit in to mainstream society. For Leila, though she knows there are many Chinese Americans like Dale, she will not identify herself with Dale. Besides, both Mason and his friend Zeke resist all kinds of "chink jokes" people make based upon their race. Their reaction to race jokes readily explains their zero tolerance of being racialized by a mindless laugh. For Mason and Zeke, to laugh with the "chink jokes" is to reinforce the negative stereotypes non-Asian people impose on Chinese Americans. These younger generations in Chinatown realize that they cannot be totally Chinese, nor are they willing to accommodate themselves to the typical middle-class American lifestyle they do not fit in. Therefore, they have to invent their own space where self-identification is not limited to two but many. Aldama remarks, "Ng complicates the picture of identity construction along simple patterns of cultural (Chinatown vs. mainstream) binaries" (87). His comment effectively acclaims Ng's intention to look at identity and space inventively with prospective possibilities. For

racial minorities who seek to cross cultural boundaries, they want to become active agents that refuse restrictions.

Conclusion

Kirby Farrell remarks, “Traumatic stress overwhelms the body’s automatic fight-or-flight response” (3). If flight is not an option, fight would be a feasible means for racial minorities to defend their cultural identity and reject racial(ized) double consciousness. Jade Snow in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and Liela in *Bone* both encounter the decision on whether they should escape from Chinatown, away with traumatic memories, or stay and deal with them. Even though they have contact with the world outside Chinatown, Chinatown is still the only place where Jade Snow and Leila feel secure like home. However, for them Chinatown is also an ambivalent site that challenges the “fight-or-flight” shackle. Wong and Ng seek to subvert the ideological dualism of double consciousness between Chinatown and mainstream society. They attempt to create an alternative for their characters to explore. In the novels, Jade Snow and Leila realize the fluidity and undefinability of their identities. They refuse to be labeled by a fixed, hyphenated identity. Instead, they desire to be free social/cultural agents crossing the boundaries of different symbolic systems. They are not bound by any identificatory system, for they are active social actors performing different characters in any given context. Any identification that stresses collective, national, or racial identity is simply a political engagement that constrains multiple impersonations of a minority individual.

Looking into Chinatown where both novels take place, we can see how Jade Snow and Leila struggle between traditional Chinese collectivist values and western individualism in a predominantly Anglo-American society. Although they never reject their Chinese heritage, they cannot stop pursuing their individuality. They struggle between two identities, but they also understand neither can fulfill the potentiality of their multiple impersonations. As a cultural mediator, Jade Snow crosses the boundary between Chinatown and American society and eventually becomes successful regardless of racial and gender prejudices. Likewise, even though Leila finally moves out of Chinatown after marriage, she always remembers Salmon Alley, Chinatown, as she recalls, “Like the oldtimer’s photos, Leon’s papers, and Grandpa Leong’s lost bones, it reminded me to look back, to remember” (*Bone* 194). For both Jade Snow and Leila, no matter how far they have gone, they always remember everything “backdaire” (*Bone* 194).⁸ Remembering the past gives these traumatized characters strength to survive. They do not deny their Chinese heritage, nor do they object the assimilation into mainstream society, but they refuse to be restrained between the two.

⁸ “Backdaire” is a sign Leon puts to direct post-officer’s delivery to where the Leongs are located. “Backdaire” is a typo for “back there.” To use it in the context, Chinatown is where the characters originate. Even though the characters eventually leave Chinatown, they always remember their past memories *back there*.

CHAPTER 3

NATIONAL TRAUMA AND PRIVATE MEMORIES: JOY KOGAWA'S *OBASAN* AND LAN CAO'S *MONKEY BRIDGE*

There is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as "signs" that recall to us former images. The convenience and the rapidity of perception are bought at this price; but hence also springs every kind of illusion.

Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*⁹

Asian North American fictional writing has been characterized by personal narratives since its rise in the mid-twentieth century. Asian North American writers use personal narratives, such as memoirs, (auto)biographies, (auto)ethnographies, or historiographic fiction, to delineate the characters' memories of the past and to trace personal lives embedded within public history. The study of personal narratives has also prospered in other disciplines, such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, history, and film studies, in which trauma and memory become the focus of interest in the humanities and sciences. According to Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver, the trajectory of studying human activities in contemporary popular culture and scholarly enquiries has been moving backwards, not forwards (1). This change of trajectory illustrates

⁹ *Matter and Memory*, p. 33.

discontent of the public who fail to obtain complete truths from public history. Thus, people turn to find out the “untold” through different personal narratives that describe trauma and memories in a particular historical context. This paradigm shift in academia reflects Ashis Nandy’s comment that “[t]he historical mode may be the dominant mode of constructing the past in most parts of the globe but it is certainly not the most popular mode of doing so” (44). This statement illustrates the problem that people usually perceive the reality constructed by public history and western epistemology, which are “both hierarchal and pyramidal. This system gives some kinds of knowing more value than others, demeans some, and elevates one kind to a position of highest value and independence from the others” (Wilshire 92). Indeed, public history reveals only parts of historical facts, while many secrets are still hidden in the dark. Only through personal narratives can one glimpse the light of “truth” in the dark.

Personal narrative furnishes us with different perspectives on sociopolitical issues. Unlike public history, personal narrative reveals an alternative view of national trauma, which causes psychosomatic damage of trauma victims and changes their perception of “reality.” In public history, national trauma comes in many forms, such as economic depression, wars, terrorism, racism, and other political persecutions. Arthur G. Neal explains that national trauma has a direct impact on personal life and always generates various psychological reactions like fear, anger, paranoia, anxiety, and hallucination. He claims, “Many of the most severe personal traumas grow out of abrupt changes in the quality of social relationships, perceptions of danger, chaos, and a crisis of meaning replace previous feelings of safety and security. ...The magnitude of such

traumas frequently makes people feel that they have become ‘damaged’ or permanently changed” (3). This explains that people involved in sociopolitical instability are inevitably subject to certain degree of traumatization.

As a common form of national trauma, war causes chaos that dramatically changes the lives of people involved in it. War victims refer to not merely people living in the country where a war takes place, but also soldiers participating in the war. Veterans may experience post-traumatic symptoms like anxiety, hallucination, or depression, after they return to a life of peace. These symptoms draw great concern in the medical field. Since post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was recognized by American Psychiatric Association in 1980, writing about trauma has been burgeoning in the past few decades. Scholars have also started to pay attention to personal narratives and autobiographies that recount various kinds of traumatization during wartime. Although academics have always had a strong interest in studying the past,

specialists have dealt with such well-known phenomena as oral history, autobiography, and commemorative rituals without ever pasting them together into something called *memory*. Where we once spoke of folk history or popular history or oral history or public history or even myth we now employ memory as a metahistorical category that subsumes all these various forms. (Klein 128)

Kerwin Lee Klein comments that memory has emerged as a discourse that encapsulates narratives of history and “promises to rework *history*’s boundaries” (128). This notion

subverts our general perception of history as the public, and memory, the private, as history and memory are intertwined. Furthermore, Klein remarks:

Freed from the constraints of individual psychic states, memory becomes a subject in its own rights, free to range back and forth across time, and even the most rigorous scholar is free to speak of the memory of events that happened hundreds of years distant or to speak of the memory of an ethnic, religious, or racial group. The prosaic emancipation is tremendous, for an author can move freely from memories as individual psychic events to memories as a shared group consciousness to memories as a collection of material artifacts and employ the same psychoanalytical vocabularies throughout. The new “materialization” of memory thus grounds the elevation of memory to the status of a historical agent, and we enter a new age in which archives remember and statues forget. (136)

Private memory possesses its own narrative power and resistance against dominant historical determinism, by which a nation-state attempts to construct the knowledge of “truths” for its people. In this regard, personal narrative is meant to destabilize dominant power of totalizing knowledge and offer alternative accesses to history in different angles.

By applying theories of trauma and memory in this chapter, I seek to explore how the characters review historical occurrences and recollect their traumatic memories through personal narratives in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) and Lan Cao’s *Monkey*

Bridge (1997). Given that *Obasan* has received much scholarship, my purpose in rereading *Obasan* is to compare it with Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* in terms of their common representation of the Asian minority's wartime experience. In *Obasan*, the narrator Naomi Nakane depicts her traumatic experience of Japanese internment in her childhood during World War II. In 1942, her family was evicted from their hometown, Vancouver, B.C., to the desolate prairie area of Alberta because of the relocation law. When Naomi was four, her mother left for Japan to take care of her ill mother, Grandma Kato. But after the Japanese Empire's bombing of Pearl Harbor, Naomi's mother was unable to return to Canada because her Japanese identity was denied entry. Young Naomi had been expecting her mother's return, but her family sealed the truth about Naomi's mother, who had been badly disfigured from atomic bombing and who eventually died in Japan. Unaware of her mother's death, Naomi has been waiting for her to return home. All through her life into adulthood, Naomi attempts to bury her childhood memory of the internment, but the pain of losing her mother caused by this national trauma still remains. On the other hand, Naomi's aunts, Obasan and Emily, recollect their traumatic memories in different ways. Obasan deals with the memories of internment in silence, whereas Emily participates in conferences and activism to protest white racism. As Aunt Emily encourages Naomi to look into the past, Naomi decides to unveil this repressed trauma inside her. At the end of the novel, the letters of Naomi's grandmother reveal the truths and unpack the catastrophes of the innocent lives killed by the U.S. atomic bombing in Nagasaki and the death of Naomi's mother.

Cao's *Monkey Bridge* is composed of two interlocked stories of the narrator Mai and her mother Thanh. Mai's story is about her immigrant experience in America, while Thanh's tale is about her tragic memories of family secrets back in Vietnam. After the Vietnam War, Mai and her mother respectively arrive in America and move to Little Saigon, a Vietnamese community in Virginia. While staying in the hospital to take care of her ailing mother suffering from a stroke, Mai starts to recall a memory when she volunteered in the hospital for injured soldiers in Saigon during the Vietnam War. Though the danger of war is far away, it still lingers in Mai's mind. From her mother Thanh, Mai learns that her grandfather Baba Quan failed to meet Thanh on April 30, 1975, the day they were supposed to leave Saigon together. Mai tries to search for his whereabouts, hoping to retrieve him from Vietnam to America for a reunion.

Thanh's narrative in diary and epistolary forms depicts her vivid memory of life in her hometown, Ba Xuyen, Vietnam. In her narrative, she discloses the disgraceful family secrets that she cannot reveal to Mai. Before leaving Vietnam, she witnesses Baba Quan kill his landlord Uncle Khan, who is actually her biological father. She decides to abandon Baba Quan after discovering that he is a Vietcong and a murderer. Ashamed of this unbearable truth about her family, Thanh invents another version of family history for her daughter Mai, hoping that Mai can feel proud of her family and start her life afresh with a new American identity. Throughout the novel, Thanh tries to construct Baba Quan as an admirable father figure, who loves his land so much that he decides to stay with it. At last, Thanh feels pressured by the burden of this guilt and kills herself by swallowing the sleeping pills. In her suicide letter, Thanh reveals the

truth about Baba Quan's identity, and her shame as an illegitimate child and as a daughter of a notorious, murderous peasant. Thanh's suicide letter deconstructs cultural and family myths, and Thanh herself also succumbs to the reality that everything is false concealment: a mythologization of the "Father" in a war-torn country to which she cannot return.

These novels share some similarities. Both authors are of Asian ancestry (Joy Kogawa, born in 1935, a native-born Japanese Canadian, and Lan Cao, born in Vietnam in 1961 and immigrating to the U.S. in 1974). Given that they have personally experienced the chaos of the war, they offer their first-hand racial minority's viewpoint to look at difficult issues, such as political persecution, racism, immigration, and assimilation. Other than reinforcing stereotypes of the Asian minority in mainstream society, both novels lead readers to unusual family tragedies and traumatic encounters. Additionally, both novels depict the daughters' flashback memories about their mothers and reveal family secrets told by the mothers to their daughters. Following the matrilineal narrative tradition of Asian North American fictional writing, both novels present daughters dedicated to finding out the secrets of their mothers. The daughters sense the incompleteness of their mothers' stories and decide to search for truths that their mothers are concealing. In both novels, the symbolic meaning of the "mother" suggests the past memories that the daughter is looking to locate. Like trauma victims retrieving their past memories, the daughters try to find out the truths hidden in their mothers' stories, as if the *mother* represented the past memories: the *other* detached from the present reality that the daughters seek to connect. This truth-seeking is also

self-exorcising to the extent that the daughters can fulfill their desire to know about the truth without being haunted by false reality.

When we locate “trauma” in both novels, it is crucial to note that our bodies are constantly exposed to potential encounters of trauma. Though physical trauma can be healed with time, psychological trauma might stay permanently in our memory. While representing traumatic experiences of the characters, both novels exemplify that the body functions like a museum or an inventory of memories in which the subject constantly reinscribes the past. Our bodies collect various kinds of memories formulated in different contexts and incidents. When trauma victims recollect their past memories, they cannot fully control what will emerge in the consciousness. Furthermore, like a ritualistic practice of our bodies, recollecting traumatic memories repetitively is a necessary therapeutic process. Critic Werner Muensterberger looks at the (re)collecting mentality from a psychoanalytic point of view. Given that recollecting traumatic experiences involves repetitive mental work, he comments, “[R]epetition is mandatory. Repeated acquisitions serve as a vehicle to cope with inner uncertainty, a way of dealing with the dread of renewed anxiety, with confusing problems of need and longing” (11). He also compares the mentality of human collecting behavior to the biological instinct of hunger, “which must be sated, the obtainment of one more object does not bring an end to the longing. Instead, it is the *recurrence* of the experience that explains the collector’s mental attitude” (13). Muensterberger contends that the recurring anxiety in collecting behavior is similar to reviewing trauma. People collect objects or recollect traumatic memories as a psychological ritual to subside their

anxiety. While collectors generally crave new items in order to construct memories, trauma victims repetitively renew their traumatic memories. People repeat their traumatic memories in order to achieve a balance of psychological dynamic. If trauma victims cannot find an outlet to release the dynamic their repressed memories generate, this dynamic accumulated in the consciousness will emerge through psychosomatic symptoms and damage their health. According to Freud, repeating the traumatic memories is “the most convenient way out and the one most agreeable to the pleasure principle” and also “the most harmless and socially tolerable solution” (474). In this sense, repeating traumatic memories is not always a psychopathological symptom but a healthful release of traumatic pain.

While the study of trauma and memory has become an important topic in academia, I am conscious of the lopsided overemphasis on personal narratives. In the epigraph of this chapter, French philosopher Henri Bergson claims that our perception of reality completely depends on memories of the past. He argues that when the images in memories supplant our actual perception of reality, illusion arises at the same time. Therefore, when we try to conceptualize public history and private memories in personal narratives, we also need to bear it in mind that false memories can arise in the recollection of private memories and that private memories are “the subjective side of the knowledge of things” (34). Any reconstruction of past memories by individuals can be subjective and partial. Kogawa and Cao attempt to demonstrate that memories can be constructed in different ways. Truths can be misconstrued, mythologized, and deconstructed. Therefore, we should look at the rupture between truth and illusion in

personal narratives, so that we can further construe whether certain modes of reconstructing memories represent some ideology or signification in certain socio-cultural context.

Obasan

The subject matter of the Japanese internment during World War II has been adopted in many works by writers of Japanese descent, such as Milton Murayama's *All I Asking For Is My Body*, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, and short stories that review this traumatic experience of Japanese Americans. Even non-Asian American writer David Guterson also uses this historical context as the backdrop of his novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, to condemn white racism and redress an injustice for Japanese Americans in the court scene. As a Canadian native of Japanese descent, Joy Kogawa retrieves this traumatic history, hoping to remind the public that Japanese Canadians suffered from the same racism as Japanese Americans. During her childhood, the male members in Kogawa's family were interned and the rest of them were relocated in Alberta from their hometown Vancouver. The white Canadian government controls the property and mobility of politically powerless Japanese Canadians. In *Obasan*, the exile story of Japanese Canadians brings readers back to the historical moment of World War II when Japanese Canadians were required to leave their homes and sent to the internment camps as if they were deportable aliens, not Canadian citizens.

Obasan is not only an important Asian Canadian novel that discusses the Japanese internment in Canada, but it also makes significant points about artistic,

cultural, and social aspects that draw our attention to private memories. *Obasan* is composed of various texts, including the personal narratives by Naomi, the diary and letters of Aunt Emily, the letters of Naomi's grandmother, the government letters and newspapers about the Japanese internment, and the memorandum by the Canadian government claiming their fault of interning Japanese Canadians. Acclaiming this novel's literary achievement in reclaiming historical justice for Japanese Canadians, Arnold Davidson comments that *Obasan* is "one of the most important Canadian books to appear in recent decades" (13), for the novel places Canadians "in a hall of shame" for the racist treatment of their own citizens (14). Moreover, he remarks:

Obasan is important for thus demonstrating the colonial and postcolonial implications of representation of itself. Any real multiculturalism must allow others to provide their own stories, to represent themselves instead of acceding to representations conveniently advanced by more dominant groups and voices with their own interests to serve. (Davidson 16)

Indeed, the textual hybridity of *Obasan* illustrates that different perspectives and voices should be allowed to exist in a multicultural nation-state. Also, John Herd Thompson notes that *Obasan* depicts the Canadian government's racism that treated the people of Japanese descent as enemies during wartime (3). John Moss equates the brutality of the Canadian government to the German Nazis (201). Both critics appreciate the novel's political end to draw the public attention to this historical disgrace in Canadian history. Besides, from the viewpoint of literary aesthetics, Donald Goellnicht posits *Obasan* as a "historiographic metafiction, a fiction that questions the making both of fiction and

history” (288). Another critic, Chinmoy Banerjee, approaches *Obasan* in a psychoanalytical perspective and argues that the novel is Naomi’s “therapeutic narrative in which a woman, pathologically silenced by the multiple traumas of sexual molestation, mother’s abandonment, political internment and the condition of the Japanese culture of silence, finds her voice and comes to writing” (101). Banerjee explicates Naomi’s determination to resist silence that makes the internment victims invisible in public history. By recollecting this experience of internment, Naomi eventually faces her individual trauma and reclaims her subjectivity in history.

In *Obasan*, unaware of the death of her mother, narrator Naomi had been waiting for her mother’s return since childhood. What Naomi relies on is her mother’s blurry image in the photo, the only memorable item that Naomi’s mother leaves before going to Japan. For Naomi, memories of her mother are episodic fragments, like the breaking, elliptical syntax of her narration. When she sees her mother’s picture, trying to remember her image, Naomi says, “[O]nly fragments relate me to them now, to this young woman, my mother, and me, her infant daughter. Fragments of fragments. Parts of a house. Segments of stories” (64). Nevertheless, viewing photographs

not only enables Naomi access to memory but also, indeed, in the creative, reconstituting development of photography, analogizes memory itself. Studying the photo of her childhood self and her long-lost mother, Naomi muses on the unassailable distance between her present and the past that she mourns, that the photo conjures up. (Phu 124)

Additionally, in terms of the collecting value of photographs, Stewart remarks, “The silence of the photograph, its promise of visual intimacy at the expense of the other senses (its glossy surface reflecting us back and refusing us penetration), makes the eruption of that narrative, the telling of its story, all the more poignant. For the narration of the photograph will itself become an object of nostalgia” (138). As time goes by, the image and textuality of a photograph is translated into different stories that capture the photograph owner’s past. In one of her many episodes of childhood memory, Naomi witnesses a hen pecking the chicks to death. However, while Naomi is terrified by such a violent scene, Naomi’s mother remains calm and quietly takes care of the mess. Naomi describes her mother’s composure: “All the while that she acts, there is calm efficiency in her face and she does not speak. Her eyes are steady and matter-of-fact—the eyes of Japanese motherhood . . . without fanfare, without reproach, without words” (71). For Naomi’s mother, silence seems like her nonverbal communication, giving her strength to deal with violence. The way Naomi’s mother deals with violence is to handle the consequences in silence and move on with her life. Words appear redundant at this moment because they cannot change any chaos that has already happened.

Likewise, Naomi’s aunt Obasan is also a silent character throughout the novel. Rather than using voices or words to articulate the pain, Obasan collects objects from daily life, such as pictures, clothes, books, and identification cards, as her method of soothing the anxiety of trauma and transferring the voice of protest into deep silence. In Naomi’s eyes, Obasan is “the possessor of life’s infinite personal details” (19) because she “never discards anything” (53). Obasan depends upon her collection to review past

memories because those collected objects exist as historical narratives that tell of the political tragedy befalling her family. She never complains, but “silence with her small body has grown larger and powerful” (17). This silence within the body illustrates that silence is not a passive acceptance of trauma but a metaphor of resistance. For Obasan, it seems that silence propels a traumatized body to grow, gain strength, and survive. Obasan’s body generates the resisting power that refuses to assimilate to the present reality and incessantly fixates on past memories. Although she physically lives in the present, her psychological time is always temporally delayed, for her traumatic past is her permanent present. With her collection of objects and recollection of the past memories, Obasan regains the strength to survive. These objects crystallize the memories that record her people’s victimization.

Obasan’s silence appears to be a passive acceptance of her sufferings, and her reserved emotions are unfathomable to others. Obasan commemorates her traumatic memories by constantly re-viewing the objects that she collects in the attic. In her book, *On Longing*, Susan Stewart refers to C. Montiesor, who recommends the idea that every house should possess a ‘Museum’ (162).¹⁰ Just as the attic stores the objects of the past, Obasan’s body actively stores the memories of the past. She collects old items as souvenirs to renew her everlasting memories. To a certain extent, she is empowered by the silence of collecting and reviewing those old items as a ritual of psychological consolation. Every time she reviews those items in the attic, her sense of temporality seems to have become a meaningless flow. Those collected objects are “to authenticate

a past or otherwise remote experience and, at the same time, to discredit the present” (Stewart 139). This idea exemplifies the constant repetition and recollection of traumatic memories in the trauma victim’s mind. In terms of the locus of the collection, Stewart remarks:

The actual locale of the souvenir is often commensurate with its material worthlessness: the attic and the cellar, contexts away from the business and engagement of everyday life. . . . but the attic and the cellar are tied to the temporality of the past, and they scramble the past into a simultaneous order which memory is invited to rearrange: heaven and hell, tool and ornament, ancestor and heir, decay and preservation. The souvenir is destined to be forgotten; its tragedy lies in the death of memory, the tragedy of all autobiography and the simultaneous erasure of the autograph. And thus we come again to the powerful metaphor of the unmarked grave, the reunion with the mother with no corresponding regeneration of the symbolic. (150-51)

For some people, items stacked in the attic can become stagnant memories covered with dust and forgotten. However, Obasan collects objects as a way to preserve family and cultural heritage. This devout preservation is also presented in the way she prepares Japanese food for her family and practices traditional Japanese etiquette. When it comes to cultural heritage preserved through museum collecting, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, “Heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. Despite a

¹⁰ Montiesor, C. *Some Hobby Horses; or, How to Collect Stamps, Coins, Seals, Crests, and Scarps*.

discourse of conservation, preservation, restoration, reclamation, recovery, re-creation, recuperation, revitalization, and regeneration, heritage produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past” (149). Naomi notices this interweaving of the present and the past, as she narrates: “All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and reams seep and mingle through the cracks” (30). In this sense, when people review the objects that embody cultural or family heritage, they may regenerate new meanings from the collected items. For Obasan, the attic is not a lifeless location for preservation of old objects but for conservation of renewable memories, to which she can always go back without the constraint of time; it is a mnemonic space for active interchange of memories between the past and the present.

The attic scene in Chapter Five of *Obasan* develops a highly symbolic representation when Obasan and Naomi both search for past memories in darkness. Obasan looks for objects stored in the attic, like an archeologist excavating the buried objects of the past. The attic’s spatiality suggests both the human consciousness where memories are preserved and a private location where old items containing private memories and historical significations are placed. For Obasan as well as those trauma victims who rely on collected objects to remember their past, those collected objects no longer possess any physical use value. Their value instead is transformed into a psychological comfort that transcends the objects into eternity to be commemorated. In this mnemonic space, temporality is futile, for the objects placed in the attic have

London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1890. According to Stewart, this is a book on collecting for children.

surpassed the timeline between the past and the present. These objects lose the sense of time and disrupt the concept of linear chronology. Naomi's interior monologue creates an expressionist theatrical effect when the human consciousness is represented in the materialized space, as she says:

But we're trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves. Like threads of old spiderwebs, still sticky and hovering, the past waits for us to submit, or depart. When I least expect it, a memory comes skittering out of the dark, spinning and netting the air, ready to snap me up and ensnare me in old and complex puzzles. Just a glimpse of a worn-out patchwork quilt and the old question comes thudding out of the night again like a giant moth. Why did my mother not return? After all these years, I find myself wondering, but with the dullness of expecting no response. (30)

Naomi's past is like an insect lurking in the dark, and her consciousness is unable to dispense with the nightmares of trauma. At the moment in the attic, Naomi seems to be woken up from a deep hibernation. She becomes conscious of a need to dissociate herself from the noose of haunted memories and search for self-emancipation from silence and repression of trauma.

While reviewing the collective trauma of the Japanese internment victims, Naomi untangles her repressed memories at the same time, thanks to Aunt Emily's encouragement. As an activist against white racism, Aunt Emily, another aunt of Naomi's, participates in conferences on the Japanese internment and publishes her

writing about this historical injustice of Japanese Canadian victims. Upset about Naomi's silence toward this historical fact, Aunt Emily decides to share with Naomi her collection of internment documents and personal narratives that record this national trauma. Unlike Obasan, Aunt Emily works against white racism by articulating her voice of agony and expressing her opinions in writing. Aunt Emily's writing depicts her personal emotions vividly; while reading it, Naomi narrates, "I feel like a burglar as I read, breaking into a private house only to discover it's my childhood house filled with corners and rooms I've never seen" (95). This self-reflexive voyeurism kindles Naomi's curiosity about herself and motivates her to rediscover her subjectivity embedded in the historical context. She realizes that remembering the past not only generates strength to face present reality but also reconstructs an individual's subjectivity—to *re-member* the self that was once ignored and forgotten in a social/historical context.

Naomi's attitude toward the internment persecution is initially denial. Regarding Aunt Emily's criticism of white racism, Naomi merely comments, "Crimes of history...can stay in history. What we need is to concern ourselves with the injustices of today. 'Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?'" (50). Refusing to reinitiate past traumatic memories, Naomi concludes, "Life is so short...the past so long. Shouldn't we turn the page and move on?" (51). However, this escapism is not favored by Aunt Emily, who argues, "You are your history. If you cut any of it off you're an amputee. Don't deny the past. Remember everything. If you're bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream! Denial is gangrene" (60). Aunt Emily's dialectic suggests that national trauma has encoded into the victim's body like permanent scars. Our bodies constantly

(re)inscribe and (re)collect historical occurrences. Scholar Cecily Devereux suggests, “The writer liberates a *body* of evidence that had been hidden or denied; this body is re-inscribed in the fictional narrative. What is written—and written upon—is a body; and the internalized body/text is the writer’s own” (234). This idea reinforces that trauma victims’ bodies are textual evidence that recounts their suffering from national trauma and reminds themselves of the importance of their existence in the course of history.

Collecting historical documents and personal objects is important in constituting private memories. While Obasan collects old items, Aunt Emily collects texts—government letters, news articles, and her own diaries to her sister—to present historical facts and express her fury at white racism. In Foucault’s account, the way Aunt Emily records history “transforms documents into monuments” (7). Like a historian, Aunt Emily hopes to turn these documents into monuments to become permanent remarks that address the political injustice the Japanese Canadians suffer during the internment period. Besides, Aunt Emily’s diaries not only recount her personal feelings about the internment but also all the Japanese Canadians’ collective traumatic experience, as she writes, “The whole continent is in shock about the Pearl Harbor bombing. Some Issei are feeling betrayed and ashamed....We’re used to the prejudice by now after all these long years, though it’s been intensified into hoodlumism” (96). She continues her agony about the exile: “All of us. Not a single person of the Japanese race who lives in the ‘protected area’ will escape” (102). Aunt Emily witnesses the whole happening as evidence of the Canadian government’s persecution. This in-the-flesh experience, for trauma victims, has formulated new knowledge and firm truth. Unlike the silent

characters in the novel, Aunt Emily refuses to be a silent victim of scapegoatism, as she claims, “As long as we have politicians and leaders and media people who feast on people’s fear, we’ll continue making scapegoats” (42). Sadly, she writes, “[T]he rest of us who have had faith in Canada, who have been more politically minded than the others—who are the most hurt” (118).

Except for Aunt Emily, people in Naomi’s family seldom talk about their traumatic memories of the internment. From them, Naomi presumes that silence is the best measure to seal off the memories and heal the wounds. Thus, she learns to leave behind her personal pain of losing her mother, the memory of being molested by her neighbor, and the dispossession and exile. Naomi remembers when she was about ten, the family moved to Alberta during 1946-47. Before he was interned, Obasan’s husband, Uncle Sam, attempted baking. Even though his bread was “hefty as a rock” (15), Uncle Sam still tried to convince Naomi and her brother Stephen to taste it. He told the children to try some “Alberta” on the bread. Uncle Sam called margarine “Alberta” in his Japanese accent, which sounds like “aru bata,” meaning “the butter that there is” in Japanese English. Although the children refused to eat it, Uncle Sam still kept baking over the years. The bread story sounds like a joke, but it is actually an irony that suggests the tough life of Naomi’s family in Alberta; in order to make a bitter life taste better, they need some “Alberta.” Like Uncle Sam’s self-baked bread made of assorted ingredients—dark, hard, and inedible, suggesting that people petrify their memories into oblivion and silence, Naomi locks her poignant memories in silence, just

like the metaphor representing the silence of her family that Naomi mentions in the beginning of the novel, “The word is stone” (1).

While reading Aunt Emily’s collected documents, Naomi reviews the public history about the internment of Japanese Canadians on the West Coast during 1941-42 and recollects the private memory of her childhood traumatic experiences embedded in the internment period. In the beginning, she intends to distance herself from the past and resists being involved in the discussion about the past. She argues, “Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. What is past recall is past pain” (54). However, this self-abnegation is to disengage herself from her traumatic past. What she seeks to escape is not the history but her traumatized ego embedded in the history. After long silence and repressed emotions, Naomi releases this outpouring awareness at last while organizing Aunt Emily’s documents. Naomi writes:

From the past and all these papers, from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words. I want to break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection, the unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness. I am tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream, or swear, unable to laugh, unable to breathe out loud. (218)

The release of energy suggests Naomi’s self-awakening out of the suffocating silence. Although Obasan shows Naomi the power of silence, at last Naomi feels “tired like Obasan” (218), who “has turned to stone” (238). Throughout the novel, Obasan is

portrayed as a typical Japanese woman who quietly follows traditional Japanese decorum and seldom expresses her feelings. She does not reveal any remarkable change of her silence. By contrast, Naomi changes her attitude; after learning of her mother's tragedy in Japan, Naomi renounces silence, which she initially thought of as a refuge. She also "rejects her mother's martyrdom, her desire to protect her children with lies" (Tharp 219).

While recollecting her past memories, Naomi confesses another personal trauma of being sexually molested by her white neighbor, Old Man Gower, when she was four. Faced with Old Man Gower's molestation, Naomi is completely vulnerable to this pedophile. Naomi seeks silence for protection, as she says, "To be whole and safe I must hide in the foliage, odorless as a newborn fawn" (76). In her four-year-old mind, the anxiety of survival has surpassed all the fear and defense that she is supposed to have in this situation. She does not resist Old Man Gower's molestation because she remembers her mother's words: "If there is not carefulness, there is danger" (72). Naomi supposes that if she remains quiet and listens to Old Man Gower, danger will not come to her. Stuck in Old Man Gower's bathroom, Naomi expects her brother Stephen to rescue her, but she is also afraid to be seen undressed. She thinks, "I am ashamed. If Stephen comes he will see my shame. He will know what I feel and the knowing will flood the landscape. There will be nowhere to hide" (76). Deeply ashamed, she also feels the split of selfhood as she narrates, "But here in Mr. Gower's hands I become other—a parasite on her body, no longer of her mind....I clamber unbidden onto his lap. His hands are frightening and pleasurable. In the center of my body is a rift" (77).

It is reductive to simply equate Old Man Gower to the white hegemony that ravages the private lives of Japanese Canadians during World War II. To some extent, Old Man Gower's molestation reveals Naomi's grievance of her mother's ignorance and absence. While Old Man Gower is warning her not to tell her mother about what happened in his bathroom, Naomi is wondering, "Where in the darkness has my mother gone?" (77). Naomi regards herself as part of her mother, a sense of wholeness and connection between mother and daughter. Naomi narrates:

I am clinging to my mother's leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot—a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood. Where she is rooted, I am rooted. If she walks, I will walk. Her blood is whispering through my veins. The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts. (77)

This intimate mother-daughter connection suggests young Naomi's yearning for maternal care and support. However, with Naomi's silence, her mother is ignorant about the molestation and fails to come to Naomi's rescue at the dangerous moment. Naomi's sense of rift on her body symbolically suggests her fear that the truth will separate her from her mother, so she silences herself in order to remain connected to her mother. Unfortunately, silence fails to relieve Naomi's anxiety of losing her mother. The rift imagery still emerges in her childhood dream visions: "My mother is on one side of the rift. I am on the other. We cannot reach each other. My legs are being sawn in half" (77).

Naomi's awakening of her sexual violation further exemplifies the notion that the body is a museum, the site of collection of memories. Through the body, one can recall the past and remember the traumatic pain. Recollecting trauma needs not merely the working of the mind, but also the participation of the body. When reading the letters about the suffering of her grandmother and mother in Japan, Naomi thinks, "How often...did Grandma and Mother waken in those years with the unthinkable memories alive in their minds, the visible evidence of horror written on their skin, in their blood, carved in every mirror they passed, felt in every step they took?" (281). Naomi's empathetic connection with the *mother* arouses readers' pathos to the war victims in Japan who suffered from atomic bombing.

Psychologically, Naomi's initial self-abnegation of her past suggests her sense of insecurity. This insecurity perhaps originates from the absence of her mother. The absence of mother can also signify the detachment and malfunctioning of the mother country, Canada, which alienates Japanese Canadians and refuses to protect them as a mother does her children. The exile of Naomi's families, from Vancouver, to New Denver, and finally to the remote interior of Slocan, marginalizes their lives and reaffirms the impossibility of returning home. In despair, Naomi writes, "No matter how I wish it, we do not go home" (149). In the internment period, the Canadian government evicted its citizens of Japanese descent and saw them as the racial other. The trauma of a nation-state can cause anxiety that enables the government to make such an irrational decision as a racist internment. This abandonment and denial of a

country to its people is thus closely associated with the children's loss of a mother's protection.

Monkey Bridge

Published in 1997, as one of the earliest novels written by Vietnamese American writers, *Monkey Bridge* establishes its extraordinary position in Asian American literature. As "the first fictional exploration of the Vietnamese experience in America" (Schinto), *Monkey Bridge* tells a story about "the collusion of public events and private lives, and the devastating consequences of cultural and emotional dislocation on the members of a single family" (Kakitani). Jeanne Schinto acclaims that the special characteristic of *Monkey Bridge* lies in "its memorable characterizations, its pattern of images and the insights that those images invite." However, Schinto cautions that even though the author Cao and the narrator Mai both have the immigrant experience in the United States, this story is after all ethnographical fiction meant to be read as a piece of imaginary literature. Additionally, Merle Rubin views the novel as a story about "the changes that unravel and rebuild the lives of nations and individuals." These reviews demonstrate that national trauma often involves private lives and causes family tragedies.

Monkey Bridge consists of episodes of war survivors' memories. The images of trauma are so vividly represented in the text that the entire novel becomes an amalgam of the characters' fragmented traumatic memories. The central character, Mai Nguyen, depicts her new life with her mother Thanh in the United States after evacuated from

Saigon. Inserted in Mai's narrative is her mother Thanh's diary, which reviews her life in Vietnam: her family, marriage, and the relationship with her daughter. In the novel, Thanh's diary alternates with her daughter Mai's narrative. This alternation of narratives disrupts the temporal flow and represents the gap—between mother and daughter, between reality and perception, between past and present—that needs to be bridged. This mother-daughter double telling provides two different versions of family history, in which multiple voices manifest the multilayered complexity of personal narratives. As the novel evolves, the two characters' narratives gradually bifurcate into different directions. The directions reflect two characters' realities: Mai lives in the present, experiencing a new life as an immigrant in America whereas Thanh's life lingers in the past with the burden of her family trauma happening in Vietnam.

The novel starts with Mai's recollection of memories when she is at present in a hospital of Virginia taking care of her mother in 1978. The identical hospital setting triggers Mai's flashback memory to the moment in the hospital of Saigon in 1968, where she has volunteered to take care of war-wounded soldiers since she was seven. This flashback memory reflects Mai's traumatized consciousness overlapped with past and present. Even with a ten-year time span, Mai still occasionally dissociates herself from the present reality. She remembers the year she left Vietnam: "Nineteen seventy-five, that terrible year, was still as present, and still as inevitable, as ever" (93). Staying in the hospital with her mother, Mai's memory has flown back to Saigon:

All around me, the bare walls expanded and converged into a relentless stretch of white. The bed sheet white of the hallway was an anxious

white I knew by heart. White, the color of mourning, the standard color for ghosts, bones, and funerals, swallowed in the surface calm of the hospital halls. A scattering of gunshots tore through the plaster walls. Everything was unfurling, everything, and I knew I was back there again. . . .It was all coming back, a fury of whiteness rushing against my head with violent percussive rage. (1)

In her flashback, she has been going back and forth between two temporalities, as she recalls, “I knew I was back there again.” It is not her first time to experience this flashback memory but simply a ritualistic repetition. In the beginning of the novel, Mai associates the white color of the hospital with that of a funeral. The whiteness of the hospital, the death, the quietness, and the temporary peace during wartime always suggest something ominous about to happen. The death imagery explicitly presents itself in the white color of mourning in the hospital room where “the walls and the tiles and the stark white of my mother’s twisted sheets and pillows emitted a flurry of bright, funeral-white lights” (4). The novel’s beginning with the funeral imagery structurally dovetails with Thanh’s own funeral at the end of the novel.

The death imagery in the novel foreshadows Thanh’s weak physical condition and her impending death. Her physical debility also reflects her psychological state damaged by the trauma of war. After arriving in the United States, Thanh has been living in a state of insecurity, resisting a new lifestyle in America. Thanh’s anti-assimilation into her new American life suggests her reluctance to associate herself with the present reality, which, for a trauma victim like her, provides little prospect of life

but constant repetitions of her traumatic memories. She starts to keep a diary at night, transcribing her past memories into written texts like her own autobiography that reviews her earlier life and confesses her family secrets. At fifteen, Thanh went to the Providence School to learn, hoping that education could change her life. She was looking forward to marrying a good man with a happy marriage, but after all she still follows the traditional mode of marriage, living with her parents-in-law in the countryside and expected to fulfill household duties of a daughter-in-law. Her husband was a well-educated philosopher, but he was not home much because of his teaching job at college in town. He eventually died in his sleep. In her writing, she reveals the relationship of her parents. Baba Quan was a Vietcong and an alcoholic, and he even forced his wife Thuyet to prostitute herself to his landlord Khan. When Baba Quan was drunk lying on the bed, Thuyet had to go to work in the rice field in order to support the family. Afterwards, Thanh gradually found out all the ugly truths about her family—Mama Thuyet's extramarital relation with her landlord Khan, Baba Quan's political identity as a Vietcong, and Thanh herself as Khan's illegitimate child.

The most traumatizing moment in Thanh's life is to witness Baba Quan's homicide. After Thanh's mother died of illness, Thanh tried to bury her mother's body in the graveyard. However, she accidentally saw Baba Quan murder Uncle Khan and throw his body into the river. Terrified by this scene, Thanh tried to shun him but was unfortunately attacked by the napalm the Vietcongs installed in the bamboo woods. When she woke up from a coma in the hospital, Thanh realized that she had lost her mother's body, which was "never found and must have remained exposed, soulless,

forever hungry and forever wandering by the waters of the Mekong” (251). Failing to bury her mother’s body, Thanh feels guilty of abandoning her mother.

For Thanh, her life ends the day she witnesses Baba Quan’s murder. Even after she survives the war and finally settles down in America, she has been living in a life-in-death situation. Thanh consciously resists any comfort her new American life can provide her because she intentionally punishes herself for the guilt and shame that her family history brings her. For example, when Thanh refuses to wear sweaters and socks in cold winter and prefers to get close to her daughter for warmth, Mai feels that “[i]t was an undramatic moment, meaningless to her, perhaps, but completely significant to me. I could have offered her reality: a sweater, socks. It would have been as simple as that. But somehow, at that moment, my mother, imperfect and unable to adjust, died in my mind” (70). Thanh’s life-in-death situation manifests that she only lives in the past. Her sense of the present is stagnant, synchronic temporality as if constructed by the linguistic structures of Vietnamese, as she writes, “Our reality...is a simultaneous past, present, and future. The verbs in our language [Vietnamese] are not conjugated, because our sense of time is tenseless, indivisible, and knows no end” (251). The atemporality in Thanh’s traumatized consciousness reflects theorist Author G. Neal’s remark:

Under conditions of national trauma, the boundaries between order and chaos, between the sacred and the profane, between good and evil, between life and death become fragile. People both individually and collectively see themselves as moving into uncharted territory. The central hopes and aspirations of personal lives are temporarily put on

hold, replaced by the darkest of fears and anxieties. Symbolically, ordinary time has stopped: the sun does not shine, the birds do not sing, and the flowers do not bloom. (4-5)

Thanh does not claim America as her home because she has “no desire to stake her future in this land” (91). Thanh sees her American life as transient and temporary even though returning to Vietnam is most unlikely for her. By contrast, Mrs. Bay, Thanh’s neighbor back in Vietnam and now in Little Saigon, assimilates successfully into her new American life. Thanh is so deeply damaged by her traumatic memories that she fails to integrate into the present reality that provides a secure living environment. All the chaos, the profanity, the evil, and the death that have occurred to her family during the wartime, are too severe to bear for her.

Impending death is one of the most threatening experiences for war survivors, as Neal remarks, “The collective sadness of a national trauma grows out of the death symbolism that is involved either directly or indirectly” (5). The lives of trauma victims were once so close to death, but after they survived, it has become a mission for them to tell this unforgettable experience. In *Monkey Bridge*, Mai recalls this great impact of impending death that she deeply felt on the day she left Saigon. With the arrangement of Michael MacMahons, an American colonel and also a friend of Mai’s family, Mai was evacuated on a Pan Am flight from war-torn Vietnam to America in 1975. Thanh returned to Ba Xuyen to take care of her sick mother and failed to go with Mai. Mai remembers the moment of separating from her mother/mother country: “The fear of separation I suddenly understood that day to be a fear as primordial as the fear of death.

Once felt, it stays forever trapped, like a child's muffled cry, inside one's chest" (97). After adopted by the MacMahons family and settled down at their residence in Farmington, Connecticut, Mai still feels connected with her residual memory of Vietnam even though it has gradually faded away in her mind. When watching the TV news about the collapse of Vietnam, Mai looks at it from an insider's view: "It was as if all of America were holding its breath, waiting for a diseased body, ravaged and fatigued, and now all too demanding, to let go. Death must be nudged, hurried, if only it could be" (98). In this description, Vietnam is reduced into a diseased body in this battle that needs death to end all the chaos, as if a seriously ill patient wished death to end her life and relieve the pain. However, for the Vietnamese diaspora in America, the pain of seeing Vietnam collapse will never go away.

Vietnam as a diseased body is parallel to Thanh's infirm body—it is the mother's body that is emaciated and pathologized. Mai realizes that, with the torment of the Vietnam War and the medical procedures in the hospital, her mother's body "had become a battlefield, she a war wound fastened to a bed in a suburban hospital more equipped to deal with cesarean sections and other routine operation" (7). Thanh's body inscribes not only the medical suffering she has gone through, but her scars on the face burned by the napalm also permanently etch the traumatic moment of her life. Like her own writing, Thanh's body becomes a text that reinscribes the national trauma and recollects the personal past. However, Mai knows little about her mother; this ignorance of her own mother, just like her unfamiliarity with her mother country Vietnam, creates a gap between her and her mother. Seeing her mother lying in the hospital, Mai thinks,

“Here was my mooring, this woman I called my mother, curled like a sick child in half-light of her curtained room. No one could love me as much, yet no one could seem as alien” (138). The sense of alienation from her mother arouses Mai’s desire to find out her mother’s stories. The hospital scene also illustrates a switch of the traditional pattern of mother-daughter relationship in which the mother is usually the caretaker of her child; here, Mai becomes the “mother” taking care of “a sick child.” Mai is eager to know about her mother, as well as desperate to know about her self.

In the novel, knowing the (m)*other* becomes a significant trope, which denotes knowing not only about the mother Thanh and the mother country Vietnam, but also about the past memories—the *other* truths as well as the truths of the *others* that Thanh attempts to conceal. Thanh has been secretly keeping a diary at night to record her life of the past and the thoughts that she is unable to share with her daughter. When Thanh is hospitalized, Mai accidentally discovers Thanh’s diary that she is engaged in her “nighttime life.” Mai is surprised to see her mother’s handwriting: “I could trace its movements, the deep strokes, the fine, deft lines. Its muscular letters, erect and vertical, marched across the creased pages in a formal, authoritative Vietnamese I could still read and understand but could not, at this point, write myself” (46). Instead of verbally articulating her thoughts, Thanh’s handwriting transcribes them, like a bridge connecting a mother with her daughter. The fact that Mai discovers Thanh’s diary implies Mai’s detective voyeurism, eager to gather information about her mother. Given her eagerness to connect with her mother and her uneasiness at prying into her mother’s inner world, Mai experiences the ambivalence between herself and her mother:

A sense of distance and remoteness had attached to her [Thanh's] body, and it was at moments like those that I understood the true meaning of absence....In one of my desperate attempts to reach her, I had felt inclined to steal the confessions I knew were still stored in her drawers. I wanted to break through the membrane that kept us apart and plunge headfirst into a prenatal space where I could reach my mother's true thoughts. But I simply couldn't, not with my mother constantly by my side. (134)

There is a strong sense of connection that Mai wishes to make with her mother like the prenatal attachment of the fetus to its maternal space. Mai feels that reading private writing is like intruding on the writer's private space. However, reading Thanh's personal narrative fulfills the pleasure of Mai's voyeurism and her desire to know the truth about the (m)other.¹¹

If Thanh's storytelling is informative and descriptive, Mai's narration by contrast is interpretive and interrogative. Mai's narration is trauma writing about her wartime experience, but it is also a cultural critique of the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States, her personal views on the Vietnam War, and her detective-like investigation of truths, as she claims that she is "an outsider with inside information" (41). Mai plays the role of an insider anthropologist who observes her mother and other people in Little Saigon, as she writes, "I could adopt the anthropologist's eyes and develop an academic interest in the familiar. I could step back and watch with a degree

of detachment the habits and manners of Little Saigon” (146).¹² She is also a detective, gathering information from different sources: personal narratives of her mother, oral stories from her adoptive father, Michael MacMahons, and his wife Mary’s collection of articles and newspaper clipping about Vietnam, all of which help Mai to piece together all the information and construct her perception of history.

Thanh’s diary offers the most important source for Mai to construct her idea of Vietnam. When Thanh describes the reminiscence of her hometown Ba Xuyen, Mai seems to empathize with this homesickness. Like the transference of emotions from trauma narrators to their listeners, Mai repeats “I knew” in her narration to show her empathy of her mother’s feeling. For example, Mai says, “I knew she still carried the landscape of the delta in her flesh, the sound of water buffaloes wallowing the muddy fields and tadpoles jumping in freshwater ponds. And I knew that she also carried the memory of my grandfather in her heart” (115). Mai has never seen the landscape of Ba Xuyen in South Vietnam, but with Thanh’s poetic description, Mai is somehow able to imagine the beauty of this village. Besides, when Thanh talks about Baba Quan and murmurs his name in hospital, Mai thinks, “I knew of her unconscious dreams—delirious on occasion—for a reunion, and her desire to have my grandfather delivered from the dearths of Vietnam into the relative peace and comfort of Virginia” (158-9). However, Mai’s sentimental interpretations of Thanh’s feelings are misleading. As the

¹¹ In *Obasan*, Naomi also expresses the same feeling when reading Aunt Emily’s private writing to her sister (Naomi’s mother).

¹² The way Mai looks at Little Saigon in an anthropologist’s eyes resembles Jade Snow Wong, who also looks at San Francisco’s Chinatown from an anthropologist’s perspective. These two examples illustrate that people of multiple cultural agencies can look at their communities from various angles. Namely, they

story evolves, the truth shows that Thanh intends to abandon Baba Quan because of the shame he brings to his family.

Mai's narration is about collecting sources and gathering information in order to reconstruct the missing family history and mother country she is eager to know about. Never fully familiar with the motherland described in her mother's narrative, Mai attempts to picture her version of Vietnam. Feeling inferior of her knowledge about Vietnam, Mai describes that even Michael MacMahons, who is simply a transient in Vietnam during wartime, "knew a Vietnam that [Mai] did not" (104). By comparison, Mai feels, "Vietnam remains like an implant" (90), from which she also feels remote, dissociated, and alienated. She says:

In Vietnam, I had never been more than a hundred miles from Saigon, and rice fields and unobstructed skies did not figure in my memories. The delta, though, had a special pull for me. It was where my mother was born. It was the place Baba Quan would not leave. And it was the place where the spirits of my ancestors remained, a supple burial ground for all those ancestral souls sustained by the collected years and the sanctuary of history. (102-3)

Mai's unfamiliarity with her mother country displays her eagerness to connect with her mother, her grandfather, and her ancestors. In her writing, Thanh expresses her sorrow for Mai's struggle in America; she observes that Mai seems "so lost between two worlds that she can't find her way back into the veins and the arteries of her mother's

can either be an insider or an outsider observing their people's lives, practices of cultural traditions, and

love” (53). Vietnam is the country where Mai was born and brought up, but after becoming a naturalized American, her memory of Vietnam has become blurry. She is conscious of her loss of belonging and her internal conflict of double consciousness between America and Vietnam, as she says, “[S]eeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither” (88).

One of Mai’s goals in reading her mother’s writing is to discover the mystery of Baba Quan. In the first half of the novel, Baba Quan has remained “a mystery, like all mysteries, that asked to be solved, that pleaded for resolution” (157). She collects information from Uncle Michael, Mrs. Bay, and most importantly, her mother Thanh’s dairy where she tells stories about herself, about Baba Quan, and about her memory of Vietnam. Since the information that Mai gathers has been processed through many levels by different source providers, what she reconstructs is no longer the “authentic” history but an interpretive history based upon her editing of the sources. In order to learn of Baba Quan, Mai has to look for sources about this paternal figure, as she says, “I wanted a different kind of information, perhaps less mannerly, more urgent, to match the urgent sadness that lay beneath my mother’s reticence” (108). With her own presumption of Baba Quan, Mai fabricates the feeling of sadness about the truths that Thanh is unwilling to reveal. Mai collects sources from different people in her life to remap the missing history and reconstruct possible truths. Even though she is dissatisfied with Thanh’s version of history, insufficient information forces her to rely

on her own imagination supported by fragments of information in order to reinvent the missing pieces.

Exorcism and Demythologization

Both *Obasan* and *Monkey Bridge* end with the revelation of truths for which the daughters have been searching throughout the novels. Naomi is searching for the reason why her mother never returns, while Mai is eager to know why her mother Thanh fails to bring Baba Quan with her to the United States. This search shows the characters' attempt to exorcise the mysteries that haunt them. Judith Herman remarks, "Psychotherapy...does not get rid of the trauma. The goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism" (181). Herman contends that traumatic memory will permanently stay in the human consciousness, and therefore, it is impossible to remove trauma out of the victim's memory. What psychotherapy can do is to let trauma victims repeat the stories of their traumatization by which to relieve the pain. They will eventually realize that they are in a secure environment where danger is no more a threat to their lives, and then they can possibly integrate their traumatic past with the present reality. It seems an ideal situation that with the help of psychotherapy, trauma victims carry on their lives without being disturbed by haunted memories. However, if the trauma victims fail to integrate, will they keep repeating their traumatic memories as a ritualistic exorcism to survive? My understanding of "exorcism" is different from Herman's. I argue that the revelation of truths in *Obasan* and *Monkey Bridge* is a symbolic exorcism for the narrators, for it clears the daughters' doubt and suspense of

the mysteries concealed by their mothers. Both Naomi and Mai question the “truths” that people around them attempt to construct, which drives them to look for the alternative side of their mothers’ stories. At the same time, the ultimate truths in the novels also demythologize cultural ideology and falsely constructed family history.

Witnessing traumatic incidents can be as excruciating as physically participating in them, for trauma victims receive the most direct impact by experiencing chaos. Trauma must be written down or talked about to become intelligible for the public to comprehend. Sometimes, the images branded in trauma victims’ memories are so astounding that their words cannot replay traumatic occurrences. Some scholars even argue that writing or talking about trauma may have gone through the narrator’s unconscious reediting or reimagining and therefore may not actually represent the authenticity of traumatic events. However, trauma narrative in an oral or written form has become an effective post-traumatic healing method. According to Devereux, remembering and writing can be conceptualized as “enacted upon the body of the writer as text; simultaneously, the ‘labour’ of recovering such deeply embedded knowledge is figured as metaphorical birth” (233). In *Obasan*, Grandma Kato records her traumatic experience by writing a letter to her family in Canada, because she thinks, “The horror would surely die...if [war victims] refused to speak” (282). However, as a witness of the tragedy of atomic bombing, Grandma Kato has been haunted by constant nightmares so much that she needs to write about this overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophe, “to extricate herself from the grip of the past” (283). Her letter also represents a first-hand empirical recording of a traumatic moment that describes the

chaos of the atomic bombing. Readers may situate themselves in the same time and space, experiencing this transferential power of trauma taking place in Nagasaki in 1945. In this example, writing is not a silent, passive act but a strong manifestation that expresses the feelings of a trauma victim, who tries to exorcise her traumatic memories and to retell trauma.

Just as Henri Bergson states that memory is full of visions and images, in terms of trauma victims' perception of reality by witnessing trauma happen, critic Joan Scott also remarks:

Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects. . . . the visible is privileged; writing is then put at its services. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience. This kind of communication has long been the mission of historians documenting the lives of those omitted or overlooked in accounts of the past. It has produced a wealth of new evidence previously ignored about these others and has drawn attention to dimensions of human life and activity usually deemed unworthy of mention in conventional histories. (23-24)

Governmental records are the authoritative version of history, but it is a censored representation of history. The unrevealed history is usually rediscovered by witnesses who have involved in national trauma. For example, in *Obasan*, Aunt Emily records her visual experiences of internment and transfers them into a written form in order to

immortalize and publicize them. Personal experiences have formed new knowledge that she perceives as reality. However, Scott cautions, “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (25). Trauma victims interpret history and constitute their knowledge based upon their personal experiences, which can be twisted, selective, and partial. As a subject in the internment, Aunt Emily provides her individual experiences for two purposes: first, by letting Naomi read her personal narratives, Aunt Emily expects Naomi to follow her perception of reality, which she alleges as the “whole truth”; second, she expects Naomi to carry this “truth” to next generations so that it will last throughout history. Aunt Emily’s motive illustrates Scott’s assertion that experience is “not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain” (38). Therefore, the authenticity of history is of less importance to trauma narrators, but their interpretation of history is meant to be more authoritative than historical documents.

The most pronounced narrative strategy in *Obasan* is the inclusion of governmental documents into fictional text to authenticate the whole historical event and the trauma victim’s empirical authority. By embedding official letters within personal narratives, Kogawa intends to re-present this national mistake more objectively. In a letter from the Department of Labour, British Columbia Security Commission, Naomi’s father, Tadashi Nakane, was notified to relocate and separate from his family. The letter reads:

Tadashi Nakane

As you have no doubt already heard, the Government has ordered that people of Japanese origin are to be segregated into different camps according to the category under which they come.

As you have expressed your desire to remain in Canada and for various reasons you are not considered suitable for Eastern Placement, you will be required to remain in New Denver.

This order is imperative and must be obeyed.

B.C. Security Commission (206)

Such an authoritarian notice presents an imperative order to be obeyed by the recipient. This letter not only notifies the internment of Naomi's father but also the relocation of the Nakane family. At the very end of the novel, Kogawa includes another governmental document: the excerpt from the memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and the Senate of Canada in April 1946. This excerpt is not inserted in the text but stands as an appendix at the end of the novel. It serves the same function as the relocation notice to support the fictional text with historical authenticity. By publishing this memorandum as a formal apology, the Canadian government acknowledges its mistake of interning Japanese Canadians during World War II. Compared with the relocation notice, the tone in the memorandum obviously sounds apologetic. For instance, two entries in the memorandum say, "The Congress of the United States has no power to exile citizens, and the British Parliament has not, even in the gravest emergency, found it necessary to assume such a power"

(298) and “[t]he Orders constitute a threat to the security of every minority in Canada” (299). The last entry even shows regret about the injustice done by the Canadian government: “The Orders are directly in contradiction of the language and spirit of the United Nations Charter, subscribed to by Canada as well as the other nations of the world, and are an adoption of the methods of Naziism” (299-300). The excerpt ends with a polite “Respectfully submitted” (300) to show the government’s deepest remorse and apology.

The memorandum reflects that national trauma cannot be separated from individual torment, especially when the individuals are the target of discrimination because of their racial difference. The Nazi uses racial hierarchy to divide human beings and slaughter innocent Jews in Europe during World War II. If the Nazi’s brutality is condemned, the white Canadian government’s racism against Japanese Canadians should also deserve equal attention through historical judgment and bring justice to victims. After World War II, internment victims write and talk about this trauma in their personal narratives, which call for the government to admit this national mistake of interning Japanese Canadians during wartime. The power of personal narratives finally propels the government to include this fact into history. The memorandum at the end of the novel suggests the government’s redress for its people. Placed at the very end of the novel, this memorandum also serves as a closure of this historical tragedy and a requiem to bring peace to victims and an exorcism of the trauma of internment.

For Naomi, her exorcism is to know about her mother’s death. In Grandma Kato’s letter, Naomi’s mother requests not to let her children see her disfigured body

and asks the family to hide the truth. This family letter depicts the tragedies of Naomi's family in Nagasaki during and after the 1945 atomic bombing. After reading Grandma Kato's letter, Naomi finally knows that her mother has died in Japan a long time ago. She realizes that her family's silence is also to hide this truth to protect the children from this traumatizing news and put the pain away. Unlike Obasan, whose "language of her grief is silence" (17), Naomi articulates, "This body of grief is not fit for human habitation. Let there be flesh. The song of mourning is not lifelong song" (295). While Obasan still repeats what she used to say, "[L]et us endure" (295), Naomi refuses to endure but learns to grieve for the loss of her mother and the suffering of her family and her people. At the end of the novel, Naomi clusters all her family into one in her monologue, like a prayer in a ritual of exorcism:

Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colors all meet—red and yellow and blue....My loved ones, rest in your world of stone. Around you flows the underground stream. How bright in the darkness the brooding light. How gentle the colors of rain. (295)

This symbolic ending suggests an oceanic embrace where "past and present, life and death, tragedy and survival seem to merge naturally into one another" (Davidson 75). Likewise, this merging of public history and private memories also symbolizes the collective trauma of Japanese Canadians and brings a harmony and peace to internment victims.

Critiquing hierarchical patriarchal dominance of western epistemology from a feminist point of view, Donna Wilshire argues that myths of a culture play an important part in private memory. She claims:

Myth, like our dreaming, uses the symbolic language of Image and Metaphor...to reveal its truths, rather than the language of Literalness, which is the only language we expect and respect in this age of mathematical and scientific exactitude. A different consciousness, a change in mental focus away from the literal, is required to unlock the meaning of Myth. Only a nonliteral, dilated consciousness can read Myth's Images and Metaphors. (97-98)

Wilshire goes on to elaborate that Myth is part of private memory that manifests another side of truths that public history fails to represent or deliberately eliminates. She remarks, "Myths, like dreams, follow a meandering thread. But if one is willing to stick with the script until the larger patterns begin to fall in place, the images of Myth will begin to make sense" (99). Myths originate from folklore and oral storytelling tradition; they mean to subvert the monolithic mode of knowledge and counter the grand narrative dominated by singular historical discourse. Ashis Nandy articulates a similar notion:

[H]istorical consciousness has not only tended to absolutize the past in cultures that have lived with open-ended concepts of the past or depended on myths, legends, and epics to define their cultural selves, it has also made the historical worldview complicit with many new forms

of violence, exploitation, and Satanism in our times and helped rigidify civilizational, cultural, and national boundaries. (44)

Dominant discourse attempts to shape our epistemological consciousness to a systemized, unified pattern, while myth has an unfettered narrative pattern and loose logic that delivers cultural values and beliefs. Indeed, the general function of myths is to engage people in repeating collective cultural beliefs generation by generation in order to immortalize their ancestors or the mythical deities they worship. However, cultural myths, like public history, can also infiltrate into private memory because they convey not only ancestral fantasies but also cultural ideologies and moral values of a collective group. *Obasan* and *Monkey Bridge* both include ethnic-specific cultural myths embedded in the lives of the characters as they recollect their private memories. However, these cultural myths in the novels are not always so counter-historical as to subvert patriarchal discourse. Instead, they reinforce systematic ideology and social structures established by patriarchal nationalism and didacticism.

In *Obasan*, the story of Momotaro is the most unforgettable memory that Naomi can relate to the chanting voice of her mother, “soft through the filter of my sleepiness, carrying me away to a shadowy ancestry” (66). This cultural folklore not only embodies the character’s cultural heritage, but for Naomi, it is also a reminder of the maternal voice that reconnects Naomi with the aural memory of her mother, while the visual memory of her has immensely faded. Momotaro’s story is a story about an old woman, who finds a giant peach by the river while doing her laundry. She takes this beautiful peach back home to show her husband. From inside the peach leaps a strong boy whom

they name Momotaro. Momotaro goes on a journey to achieve some good deeds every day. It is a simple story; however, like most cultural myths, it has its morals: “Alone in the misty mountains once more, the old folk wait. What matters in the end [of the story], what matter above all, more than their loneliness or fears, is that Momotaro behave with honor. At all times what matters is to act with a fine intent. To do otherwise is shameful and brings dishonor to all” (68). The myth of Momotaro apparently conveys a collective ideology that one should not misbehave and bring disgrace to his people. The Japanese Empire’s attack on Pearl Harbor violates this integrity and brings shame to all people of Japanese ancestry. Aunt Emily has a twist on the Momotaro story, claiming that it is a Canadian story: “We’re Canadian, aren’t we? Everything a Canadian does is Canadian” (68). This logic is paradoxical. Myths do have their cultural origins, but after global immigration and transnational culturalism, they have become hybridized. The myths can thus be construed differently, just as memory and history can be reconstructed for certain purpose. Given that a country like Canada is a multicultural country, Aunt Emily’s twist on Japanese cultural myth is to declare her national identity and reject her association with her cultural heritage of *Japaneseness* because of the shame that the Japanese Empire brings to all people of Japanese descent.

In the same manner, the cultural myths in *Monkey Bridge* perpetuate cultural ideologies. In Mai’s childhood memory, her grandfather Baba Quan is a respectful elder. He instructs Mai to worship her ancestors, as Mai remembers, “He was a Confucian and believed in the worship of spirits and the sanctity of the ancestral land” (83). Ironically, Baba Quan’s murder stigmatizes the sanctity of his ancestral land with

stains of infamous blood. As a father-figure to Mai, he is also the person who makes the betel-nut story comforting to Mai. The betel-nut story is a Vietnamese folklore about two brothers in love with the same woman. This woman marries the older brother, and the younger brother decides to leave his hometown. Traditionally, people believe that their spirit has to stay in their native land to watch over their ancestors' graves. So, the younger brother's body is exhausted because his soul does not follow it. He arrives at the river exhausted and collapses by the riverside. His soulless body becomes barren and his heart is transformed into dry limestone by the waters. The older brother goes out to look for his brother, but for the same reason, without his soul, he finally collapses at the same spot. But since his heart is filled with his wife's love, he turns into a tall tree that bears green betel nuts. The wife also loses her soul when she is out looking for her husband. After she dies by the waters, she turns into the betel vine that twists around the betel tree for support and nurturance. Baba Quan tells Mai the moral of this myth that the betel-nut represents "a symbol of eternal regeneration and devotion" (85). When people chew betel-nuts, they pray for their family to stay forever with their souls so that death will not separate them. This story is not about a triangular romance but conveys a cultural ideology. The body is transformed and merged with "earth and water," which means "country" in Vietnamese. This private story becomes public with the consent of the king, who thought it a great model to represent the idea of national patriotism. For Thanh, who firmly believes in cultural myths and karma, separating from her native land has made her lose her soul.

If carefully read, Thanh's autobiographical narrative in her diary actually mimics the archetypal mode of births of deities in Asian mythology. The deities have unique births, unique physical features, or unique power bestowed by God, with unique missions to achieve. Thanh's autobiographical narrative starts with her mother, who was born in summer but was named "Thuyet," meaning "snow" in Vietnamese. The villagers believe that this name strengthens her body like "a fighting fish" (48) with a rebellious nature, strong and fierce enough to endure any tough situation in life. Thanh herself was born with a pair of long, Buddha-shaped, "supernatural ears" (52). Mother Thuyet believes Thanh's long ears are "reborn and made permanently whole to compensate for the stumps of pig ears that had been inflicted generationally on the girls of [their] village" (52). As a tradition, people in the village chop a pig's ears if a newly-wed woman does not shed virginal blood on her wedding bed as a sign of virginity, and she will be accused as being unfaithful to her husband for bringing disgrace to her family. Thanh's ears are believed to possess magic power, as Thanh narrates, "Inside my ears were the rage and revenge of every girl from every generation before whose return with a shameful and earless pig had destroyed her family's lives—lives my mother had now gloriously resurrected" (52). She also believes, "Through my ears...I would have the power not only to heal my mother's fear but also to repair generation after generation of past wrongs by healing the faces of karma itself" (52). Inside Thanh's heart is a rebellious reaction, as "the perfect expression of [her mother's] rebellion" (51), against the wrongs of the women being accused of being promiscuous. Thanh attempts to find justice for those innocent women, for she believes that there

must be some God-sent mission for her long ears: “There is power in these ears, the power to redeem and the power to avenge” (53). Thanh talks about her own birth as if there were a certain miracle to her life. These depictions are typical in most myths where the hero(ine) rises to go against the grain and face challenges. Ironically, Thuyet and her daughter Thanh are after all ordinary Vietnamese women subject to patriarchal power. Their lives are not as blessed by their special births. While she realizes that her long ears do not bring any miracle in her life, Thanh turns to believe in karmic account of her life. She knows that as an illegitimate child, she has been cursed, and will never escape from the arrangement of karma. For Thanh, karma is the precursor of contingent chaos in her life—she is merely a pawn in the cosmos of karma.

Judith Herman remarks, “The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (2). While the past is too horrible to bear and to proclaim, Thanh denies it and reinvents another version of her history. This is partly derived from her maternal impulse to protect her daughter from being humiliated by the scandals of family history. Thanh admits that she intends to create a new world for her daughter in hopes that Mai can accomplish her dream in America without being disturbed by her mother’s past. She wishes to tell Mai the whole truth about her life, “but the history that has melted into the very walls of our veins is a long history filled with the disappointments of two full generations before” (227). Thanh’s own traumatic experience is so close to the present time that she is still deeply wounded and fails to verbalize it. Trauma is an eternal predator in the hearts of victims that brings nothing but emptiness, “like a persistent

squatter hovering in the brooding silence of [her life]” (229). For Thanh, trauma and guilt will always stay within her heart and debilitate her soul. Death seems to be the only resort to this everlasting torment.

Thanh’s personal narrative reinvents a cultural map, but her suicide letter deconstructs all the lies that she has fabricated for Mai. Thanh reinvents private history, as the way people in Little Saigon do to change their identity, profession, and date of birth. In her anthropologist’s eyes to look at her own community, Mai narrates:

Not only could we become anything we wanted to be in America, we could change what we had once been in Vietnam. Rebirthing the past, we called it, claiming what had once been a power reserved only for gods and other immortal beings. The absence of documentation was not surprising. Even those with identification papers burned them before any authority could see. There was, after all, something awesome about a truly uncluttered beginning, the complete absence of identity, of history....One after another, we were all taking leave of our old lives and sharing our liars’ wisdom. (40-41)

Like most people who know about the tricks of immigration, Mai and her mother both learn “the importance of maintaining a silence” (41). The Vietnamese diaspora has the residual memory of their home country. However, after their relocation in the United States, without a cultural and political foundation to rely on, they have to rewrite their personal history and redefine their identity. This redefinition forces members of the Vietnamese diaspora to deny their past, and to reestablish a new life and new identity in

a new country. For Thanh, the traumatic past is too unbearable to return to. In order to make life bearable, she re-creates a new personal history for her daughter. In fact, Thanh's hometown, Ba Xuyen, used to be a beautiful tropical land with rice paddies, as she describes it in her diary. But after the war, the earth has been destroyed, and "the village soil remained dull and dead, an ungenerous gray that could easily keep raw ashes smoldering and hot but could neither keep nor sustain life" (245). The tropical land no longer possesses its natural beauty. The barren earth suggests the death of motherland, which also implies the end of Thanh's life as a mother. The land that Thanh misses has been poisoned that nothing would grow. The loss of motherland exemplifies the Vietnamese diaspora's despair for a morbid home country. For Thanh, the beautiful land with rice paddies in her memory has been stigmatized by Baba Quan's murder and family secrets. Instead of nostalgia, Thanh's feeling for her hometown Ba Xuyen is only a land "poisoned" with guilt and murder, like the earth poisoned with lethal explosive chemicals.

Conclusion

Obasan and *Monkey Bridge* portray the significant psychosomatic impact of national trauma on private bodies and memories. They review the influence of war on individual life and combine personal narratives with fictional texts to demonstrate private memory as a counterhistory. Private memory in personal narratives is meant to disempower public history. Asian American studies critic, David Palumbo-Liu, asserts that ethnic narratives usually present the subversive version of history, but he is also

aware of the constraint of this epistemological claim that “any counterhistory, furthermore, must legitimate itself by laying claim to a firmer epistemology than that claimed by the dominant history” (211). This constraint illustrates that any discourse attempts to establish its own authority, but after all, what it represents is knowledge gained through different perspectives. The authors Joy Kogawa and Lan Cao re-present historical events: the relocation and internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II and the Vietnamese’s suffering of war and their lives in America after the migration. However, both novelists intend to draw their readers into the insider’s stories because public history does not reveal the psychosomatic torment of the Japanese Canadians during internment period, nor does it discuss the Vietnamese diaspora’s life before and after the War. In addition, in terms of the narrative strategy in both novels, the daughters’ eagerness to reconnect with their mothers not only follows the matrilineal narrative tradition of Asian North American fictional writing but also extends across different countries to address different cultural perception between foreign-born mothers and westernized daughters. The loss and reconnection with the mother in the novels is further elaborated as the re-association with the past traumatic memories that the characters have suffered during wartime.

Kogawa and Cao both believe that public history does contain the whole truths while private memory provides another version of reality which attempts to establish its own discourse. Kogawa admits the ambivalence about documents or private memories used as evidential credibility, for they involve the “troubling ambiguity about different kinds of relationships—not just between groups of people but also between fact and

fiction, evidence and affect” (Phu 116). Cao’s ambition in her writing is to “disrupt readers’ familiar ways of knowing, rendering them situational and mediated....Such thrust-and-parry irony resists passive and comforting assimilation into a universal reader community. It doesn’t encourage spectacular (and consumerist) rapture, but critical interpretation” (Jannette 53). Cao aims to reject people’s universalized perception of Vietnam and the Vietnamese, and encourage readers “toward permanent skepticism and instability in our ‘knowledge’ of Vietnam” (53). Both authors believe that our perception of reality can be constructed by public history, but private memory that provides another interpretation of reality also attempts to establish its own discourse with testimonial credibility. The novels show the merging of national trauma and private memories in personal narratives, but it is not the authors’ intention to advocate the idea that private memory is more valuable than public history. Instead, the novels display the potential inventiveness of private memory in the novels and seek to raise a pivotal point that, when readers locate trauma writing or historiographical discourses, they should consider multiple interpretations instead of relying on a single, monolithic narrative.

CHAPTER 4

MELANCHOLIA AND LOSS: CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE IN LOIS-ANN YAMANAKA'S *BLU'S HANGING* AND WAYSON CHOY'S *THE JADE PEONY*

Ethnicity itself is not a stable category and must be reinvented, reinterpreted, and rewritten in each generation by each individual of each ethnicity.

Rocío G. Davis

I remember in a television commercial, a teenage girl dreams of her Prince Charming coming into her life. When Prince Charming gradually approaches her, he suddenly turns into a marble statue and dramatically breaks into pieces. She realizes that it is after all an illusion. At the end of the commercial is the caption: “Disillusion is the first step to adulthood.” As I reconsider the idea of this commercial, I cannot help but wonder if the loss of innocence is inevitable from childhood towards adulthood, from naivety towards maturity, and from ignorance towards sophistication. Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* (1997) and Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony* (1995) somehow provide the answer to this question: for children, learning to accept the reality—of death, loss, separation from loved ones, shattering of dreams—is inevitable in the journey of life. The loss of innocence may sound negative and nostalgic, for *loss* connotes a permanent disappearance and a state of incompleteness, while *innocence* suggests a state of mind we used to have at a young age but we gradually lose as growing older. However, losing is an important experience, through which we learn to

transcend the sadness and excruciation of human situations and cherish the joy and happiness we can enjoy at the moment. In these novels, the loss of innocence delineates the child characters' mental growth and their progressive understanding of reality. We can see transformations in the child characters' lives that manifest their recovery from trauma of loss and their metamorphoses into mature individuals.

Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* is a survival story about three children in a Japanese American family, the Ogatas, on the Hawaiian island of Moloka'i. Through Ivah's first-person narration, readers enter the traumatized world of the three Ogata children: Ivah herself (thirteen, female), and her two siblings Blu (nine, male) and Maisie (five, female). The novel depicts their lives during the year when their mother dies. Their father neglects them and buries himself into late night work and mental depression. These children go through the trauma of mourning and melancholia over the death of their mother while learning to grapple with the difficulties of poverty and self-formation. They experience racial tension in the neighborhood and in school, as well as their discovery of sexuality. They are also confronted with the challenge of ethnic identity and the family trauma of leprosy. Lack of parental love forces the Ogata children to look after themselves in order to survive. In the end, they finally release the illusion of their mother and accept her death.

A winner of Canada's Trillium Award, Wayson Choy's first novel, *The Jade Peony*, depicts Chinese Canadian history in Vancouver's Chinatown from the Great Depression in the 1930s till World War II in the 1940s. This novel is composed of three stories narrated by three children in a Chinese Canadian family. Jook-Liang and Sek-

Lung are genetically related while Jung-Sum is adopted by the family at the age of four. In the first section, Jook-Liang talks about her dream of becoming a child movie star like Shirley Temple and her friendship with Wong Suk, an old Chinese retiree from the Canadian Pacific Railroad construction, during her childhood from age 5-9.¹³ In the second section, Jung-Sum describes his childhood in his early teens, including his flashback memories as an adopted child as well as his pursuit of masculinity and discovery of his homosexual inclination. In the third section, the youngest child, Sek-Lung, talks about his early childhood spent with his grandmother and his babysitter, and the challenge of ethnic and national identities he encounters in his community and at school. Even though these child characters struggle with their understanding of reality and self-identification, they eventually mature through interactions with their mentors.

Trauma is represented in the form of mourning and melancholia caused by loss and/or absence in these novels. This melancholia also demonstrates the pride and/or inferiority of the child characters' ethnic identification. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud asserts that loss is a necessary step toward the formation of ego. Also, he defines mourning and melancholia:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on. As an effect of the same influences, melancholia instead of a state of grief develops in some people, whom we consequently suspect of a morbid pathological

¹³ An Academy Award-winning actress, Shirley Temple was famous for being an iconic American child

disposition. It is also well worth noticed that, although grief involves grave departures from the normal attitude of life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a morbid condition and hand the mourner over to medical treatment. (164-65)

In his definition, Freud normalizes mourning and pathologizes melancholia. He asserts that mourning and melancholia share some characteristics; melancholia always originates from mourning, and both contain the idea of grieving over the lost object of love, whether it be a person, an object, or a concept. However, mourning does not reach pathological severity, while melancholia is regarded as “a morbid pathological disposition,” causing the dysfunction of mind and body. One attribute that distinguishes mourning from melancholia is that, in mourning, there is a specific loss that one mourns for; the mourner can find another object to replace the mourned, “the same turning from every active effort that is not connected with thoughts of the dead” (165). By contrast, in melancholia, it is the ego that makes the melancholic feel pathetic and empty—it is the lack from within. The melancholic reproaches himself, criticizes himself, abases himself—in short, he loses self-respect. Freud concludes that “the loss suffered by the melancholiac is that of an object; according to what he says the loss is one in himself” (168). Therefore, what matters to the melancholic is the abnegation of the ego that needs to be reformed and reconstructed.

The ego’s fixation on itself is not merely an internal cathexis but also a lack of interaction with the external world and the contextual/interpersonal network. Its

actor of the 1930s.

cathexis is constitutive and intentional to the extent that it seeks to invent various significations involved within certain socio-historical context. Judith Butler questions Freud's rendering of melancholia and its object-cathexis reasoning. As mentioned earlier, in mourning, the ego realizes the loss of love object, declares its death, and proceeds to find another object to fixate on. However, in melancholia, the ego refuses to admit the loss of a love object and turns inward to its *self* as an object of love, as well as an object of aggression and hate. Butler concludes that the ego has become as a love object to which the ego can fixate. She also senses the danger of this fixation, as she reasons:

The ego is a poor substitution of ego for the lost object, and its failure to substitute in a way that satisfies, leads to the ambivalence that distinguishes melancholia. The turn from the object to the ego can never quite be accomplished; it involves figuring the ego on the model of the object; it also involves the unconscious belief that the ego might compensate for the loss that is suffered. To the extent that the ego fails to provide such compensation, it exposes the faultlines in its own tenuous foundations. (*The Psychic Life of Power* 169)

Freud simply attempts to differentiate mourning from melancholia and fails to elaborate why the melancholic subject turns inward to the ego. Butler contends that if the ego fixates on itself as an object of love, there must be something ideal about the ego—the unknowable ideality that drives the ego to return to itself. The melancholic's psychic state reflects that the effect of melancholia “appears to be the loss of the social world,

the substitution of psychic parts and antagonisms for external relations among social actors” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 179). In other words, “[m]elancholia refuses to acknowledge loss, and in this sense ‘preserves’ its lost objects as psychic effect” (*The Psychic Life of Power* 181-82).

This new understanding of melancholia allows me to explore the interrelation between the individual suffering of loss that causes melancholia and the external socio-political environment that triggers melancholia to Asian minority children. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian note that melancholia “offers a capaciousness of meaning in relation to losses encompassing the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the psychic and the social, the aesthetic and the political” (2-3). Opposed to Freud’s interpretation of melancholia as pathological, they conclude that the meaning condensed in melancholia enables us “to understand the lost object as continually shifting both spatially and temporally, adopting new perspectives and meanings, new social and political consequences” (5). This concept accounts for melancholia not merely as a psychopathological symptom, but also as a contextual representation based on different socio-cultural agencies that create multiple significations of trauma. Erin Suzuki also subscribes to this rethinking of melancholia, as she comments, “[T]he cost of pathologizing melancholia is the elision of the dynamic relationship that develops between the melancholic and the idealized object of loss, and the absence of this relationship forecloses the possibility of agency for the subject who comes into being through melancholia” (37). These critics agree on one crucial point: melancholia should be depathologized and reconsidered in its signifiatory dynamics when external factors

such as race, ethnicity, gender, sex, geography, and religion are involved in the melancholic's formation of subjectivity.

In terms of their narrative style, *Blu's Hanging* and *The Jade Peony* are both *Bildungsroman* to some extent, but more specifically, they are 'Childhood' narratives. Constructed in a linear fashion, Childhood narratives describe young characters' experiences, including their understanding between imagination and reality, their interactions with adults, and their response to life occurrences with their progressive understanding of the adult world. Although childhood is always an important part in autobiographies, Richard Coe claims that children see differently, reason differently, and react differently, so their perspectives will not be as accurate as the narrator in autobiography. He argues that 'Childhood' should be viewed as a genre independent of autobiography, for it has its own internal laws, conventions, and structures. One of the characteristics of 'Childhood' writing is that "Childhood constitutes an alternative dimension, which cannot be conveyed by the utilitarian logic of the responsible adult" (Coe 2). Namely, writings *about* children are different from the childhood section in an autobiography. 'Childhood' is a genre similar to *Bildungsroman*. Both genres are about the child protagonist's formation of selfhood, and the protagonist usually attains maturity and understanding of human life in the end of the story. However, in *Bildungsroman* we see the child character grow up and become a mature adult, while in 'Childhood' we do not see the child character's future. *Blu's Hanging* and *The Jade Peony* are *about* children and focus specifically on childhood only.

Scholar of childhood narratives in Asian American literature Rocío G. Davis remarks that ethnic life writing “challenges and widens traditional autobiography by negotiating narrative techniques, experimenting with genre, and raising increasingly complex questions about self-representation and the process of signification” (161). These characteristics are identifiable in *Blu’s Hanging* and *The Jade Peony*. First, the narrator-protagonists are Asian minority children telling stories about their childhoods in the first-person position. In *Blu’s Hanging*, narrator Ivah Ogata recounts her family life in Moloka‘i after her mother’s death, while in *The Jade Peony*, the three Chinese Canadian children depict their encounter with important figures that change their lives. Different narrators represent different experiences in the novels. This multivoiced characteristic in ethnic life writing “allows the subject to control and exploit the tensions between personal and communal discourse within the text and signify on a discursive level” (Davis 164). In addition, Alicia Otano notes that child perspective is “a symbolic narrative strategy that designs multilayered possibilities for meaning in ethnic writing” (9). This symbolic narrative strategy is most obvious in these novels, for the narrators are the members of racial minorities—Japanese Hawaiian/American in *Blu’s Hanging* and Chinese Canadian in *The Jade Peony*—by whom numerous layers of narratives offer different levels of interpretations and commentaries on their socio-politically disadvantaged situations. Instead of following the singular narration in autobiographical tradition, the narratology of ethnic life writing proffers both collective and individual interpretations of narrators.

In these novels, childhood experience is commonly associated with the children's direct emotional responses toward certain incidents. Without the adult's sophistication that filters or desensitizes social situations and controversies, children usually respond to the changing circumstances of their lives more directly than grown-ups, and their judgment of right or wrong is also more straightforward. Roberta Culbertson notes that children are more sensitive to violence and threats of death than adults. Although children are generally assumed to have abundant imaginations and innocent fantasies, Culbertson argues that children are well conscious of their world, a world that is different from their imaginary fantasy land. She remarks:

Childhood memories are difficult for the adult to comprehend because they are of what the child experienced, without benefit of adult knowledge, and in a body different from that of an adult. For a child, especially a young one, the lines between life and death, ordinary and nonordinary, reality or states of consciousness, and the inner and the outer dimensions of experience are all more fluid than they become in later life. [...] In the child, these mix with his generally incomplete information about the ordinary, and with his often nonverbal knowledge of the transcendent, to create memories of terror and powerlessness that are at once disgusting and arresting, banal and transcendent. (181)

For example, in *Blu's Hanging*, the death of their mother and the negligence of their father force the Ogata children to be cautious of the impending danger around them. In *The Jade Peony*, Jung-Sum's fighting experience shows his strong will to survive at the

“win-or-die” duel with Frank Yuen. Sek-Lung also experiences the complexity of different deaths from his Grandmother and his babysitter Meiying.

Even though the narrators in the novels occupy the first-person position, their scope of storytelling often surpasses the first-person limit and illustrates an omniscient perspective. I argue that instead of conforming strictly to the laws of genres as traditionally defined, Yamanaka and Choy both attempt to breach the confinement of genres and infuse their narrators with an adult’s critical viewpoints about their ethnic communities. Such a blurring of genres of autobiography, ethnography, fiction, historical writing, and myth offers readers “a new cognitive tool: an acceptance of the indeterminacy of the past, transmitted through the conflation of genres in (his)stories of this past” (Vautier 29). In other words, creating new genres, like the way Asian minorities reinvent their ethnic identities, is a literary revolution for Asian North American literature that resists any set standards. This idea echoes Davis’s comment that the concept of ethnicity “must be reinvented, reinterpreted, and rewritten in each generation by each individual of each ethnicity” (164).

Blu’s Hanging

Blu’s Hanging plays a significant role in the history of Asian American Studies due to the controversy about the accusation of the author’s racism. The Filipino representatives in the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS) argue that the author of *Blu’s Hanging*, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, deliberately presents the Filipino character, Uncle Paulo, as a sexual pervert and a rapist in the novel. This negative

portrayal perpetuates the ethnic stereotypes of Filipino males. The board eventually decided to rescind the 1997 Best Fiction Award given to Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* because of this contestation. In their appeal, the Filipino representatives accused Yamanaka of her intentional racism against the Filipinos in Hawai'i, because she depicted the stereotype of sexual perversion on a Filipino character in her volume of poetry *Saturday Night at Pahala Theater*. When this book was awarded the Best Book of the Year by the AAAS in 1993, the Filipino representatives already expressed their concern about the derogatory depiction of Filipino characters in the book. However, when the same stereotype reappeared in *Blu's Hanging*, the Filipino representatives decided to protest against the author's prejudice. The controversy over *Blu's Hanging* with the AAAS has been vehemently discussed and debated in major Asian American studies publications, such as *Amerasia, Journal of Asian American Studies*, as well as the local press in Hawai'i.

This controversy illustrates an important issue inside the political composition of Asian American Studies. The term "Asian American" was coined during the Civil Rights movements in the late 1960s. Its purpose is to call for people of Asian origin to share this collective identity to consolidate their political power in a predominantly Caucasian society. However, the problem with this collective identity is that conflicts and disagreements among different Asian ethnic groups still exist. For example, during World War II when the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor, resentment against the Japanese race flamed not only in mainstream society but also within the Asian American community. Many Chinese declared their specific ethnic identity to avoid

being misrecognized as the Japanese. Some Japanese changed their names into Chinese to avoid discrimination. In the controversy over *Blu's Hanging*, the Filipino representatives believe that Asian American writers should avoid any representation that deals with stereotypes or degrading images of Asian Americans. Although such a claim is legitimate because it helps reconstruct a positive image of Asian Americans, the political censorship that regulates the characterization of Asian Americans limits writers' literary imagination. Autonomy in literary aestheticism has been interfered by collectivist political agenda.

In terms of this controversy, some scholars argue that ethnic writings always deal with the socio-historical conditions of racial minorities and thus cannot be divorced from the literary aesthetics that Yamanaka has attempted to achieve in the novel. Others suggest that readers should return to formalistic textual analysis of the novel so that they would appreciate the literary imagination and techniques that Asian American writers are dedicated to. I agree with the second opinion in general terms. Literary production should be given total autonomy, despite the possibility of depicting negative images of people of a particular race or from a particular region. However, if Asian American Studies as an academic field seeks to achieve its aesthetic autonomy, it must “distance itself *from* the community” (Chiang 29), which, I argue, is politically impossible. It is unlikely that literature can decontextualize itself from politics and history by any possible means, for they all coexist organically and interrelate to each other. Initially established out of the bourgeois anti-hegemonic agenda, Asian American Studies objects to the dominant group's totalization and racial discrimination. The *Blu's*

Hanging controversy clearly demonstrates the impossibility of focusing simply on the aesthetic level of literature and separate Asian American literature from political and historical contexts. Leaning toward either method of reading Asian American literature can lead to biases and can neglect this minority literature's heuristic perspectives. My discussion of *Blu's Hanging* does not aim to rekindle the debate over this racist-or-not conundrum. Instead, by analyzing the aesthetics of the novel, I would like to consider how political and historical contexts affect its textual construction. Through children's trauma in the novel, I also explore racial melancholia and obscured historical trauma of Hawai'i.

Alice Byrnes remarks that in archetypal analysis of Jungian psychology, an archetype exists in the human unconscious; we may not know directly how it is functioning in our lives, but the archetype is "represented indirectly in the form of symbol. What is key to an understanding of Jung's archetype of the child is that it be regarded as a symbol and not as a child per se" (1). In literature, the child's existence and behavior carry a symbolic meaning, such as innocence, freedom, and gentleness, as opposed to adulthood virtues of wisdom, responsibility, and strength. Certain patterns occur in writings about children, such as abandonment, wholeness, mutual transformation of the protégé and mentor, as well as unity of time (Byrnes 33). In this sense, children in literature are represented not only as a physical presence but also as tropes and symbols.

Blu's Hanging demonstrates children's psychological impairment through the loss of the mother. The Ogata children's trauma shows their struggle with life and their

mourning and melancholia caused by their mother's death. In many aspects, these children's lives lack financial support and parental protection, which causes them to mourn "in a self-destructive fashion" (Cheung 308). The lack of maternal love reflects directly on the material insufficiency of food. The first few chapters of the novel depict the sudden change of these children's lives after their mother's death, which comes along with the already deprived situation in the Ogata family. Ivah narrates, "We eat mayonnaise bread for a long time after Mama's funeral" (3). When their mother is still alive, the children have home-cooked meals freshly served on the dinner table. After her death, mayonnaise bread, low in nutrition and high in fat, is the only affordable food Ivah can prepare for her family. Although the economic situation might have been low for the Ogatas, the loss of the maternal figure magnifies this desperate situation.

Children have a different concept of the world. Christine Lorre indicates, "The perspective of the children is limited and the world they depict is often a small one, as opposed to that of the grown-ups. It is a world of sensation rather than analysis, of play and imagination rather than reality" (72). One of the children's basic needs is being free of hunger. For the Ogata children, the need of mother's love is transferred to the desire for food. Craving for food becomes the substitute for the yearning of mother's love. Among the three children, Blu's behavior of overeating reflects most distinctively this craving for maternal love. The way he constantly gorges food reflects his symptom of melancholia over the death of his mother. Not only does his overeating make him gain weight, but his melancholia is also materialized by the change in his body. He dreams of food filling in the house, the food that the family cannot afford. He relieves his

sorrow by consuming cheap snack food to fill his stomach. Seeing Blu's self-destructive overeating, Ivah writes, "Blu eats Frosted Flakes with milk, bowl after bowl, until he feels sick and full, rolls to his side, and closes his eyes till dinnertime" (11). Since the mother as a love object is no longer available, Blu turns to himself, filling himself with excessive food and also filling the void inside him as self-torture.

It is difficult to term Blu's behavior as mourning or melancholia, for different symptoms occur discursively and simultaneously to him. However, through overeating and consuming, Blu is grieving and recovering from his trauma to construct his subjectivity as a mature ego and accept the loss of the love object. Blu defines "crave" for Ivah to reveal his desire to eat and to be loved:

"I *crave* for chocolate. All kinds, especially the kind with Rice Krispies inside like Nestlé Crunch and \$100,000 bar."

This I know.

"I *crave* Mama come to see if Maisie and me sleeping."

I know.

"I *crave* for friends. Ivah, you my best friend."

Know. (12)

In his definition, Blu illustrates his lack of material satisfaction. In addition to chocolate and other snacks, he craves maternal love and social network of friends. In terms of this craving, Cheung notes, "Blu's longing for sweets, yearning for his mother, and desire for social acceptance are all negotiated through the verb *crave*. Lacking his mother, Blu seeks to replace her via food and his sister" (309). Ivah responds *I know* to show her

understanding of Blu's frustration with their mother's death. Her response to Blu's words is actually her thought without verbalizing it, which also empathetically reflects her own frustration at the same time. When their cousin Big Sis notices Blu's obesity, Ivah feels ashamed because of the mayonnaise bread Blu has been eating. Ivah writes, "No Mama, no Ziplocs. No Mama, no vitamins. No Mama, no Pledge. No Mama, no wonder" (82). Although Ivah empathizes Blu's compulsive craving and overeating, the filling of food will never replace the lost maternal love. Instead, Blu must overcome his loss in order to formulate his ego.

On the other hand, Blu's binge eating is juxtaposed with another behavioral symptom: his compulsive shopping for commodities. Blu's desire to possess certain products serves to complete the material insufficiency of life and the lack of mother's love. He is particularly obsessed with brand commodities, such as Spam, Farmer John bacon, Florida orange juice, Chee-tos, Rice Krispies, Nestlé Crunch, Pepsi, Hershey's, and Herbal Essence. In some measure, consumerist behavior provides the Ogata children with economic security and emotional comfort. When they consume brand products, they somehow feel less worried about their material insufficiency. Their consumption also temporarily relieves the fear of their financial instability. For example, being able to stay together and exchange gifts on important holidays suggest the completeness and solidity of family. On the first Christmas Eve without their mother, the children manage to celebrate the holiday and exchange gifts with one another. Aware of the needs of his sisters, Blu buys Ivah sanitary pads and Maisie, panties. These gifts are trivial everyday items that people generally would not think of

as ideas for gifts. However, for the Ogata sisters who are too embarrassed to buy these items themselves, the gifts are the extravagant necessities that can solve their personal problems. In return, Blu receives his favorite snacks and shampoo. The children maintain the holiday tradition and learn to take care of one another with love and concern. The material exchange in this situation has provided an emotional consolation.

In addition to his overeating and obsessive consuming, Blu's erratic behaviors and "hanging" games also reflect his lack of security and self-torture. For instance, Blu watches the kids at school playing with a kitten; they put it in a milk shake cup and throw it around the field like a football until it dies. Maisie wants to make a funeral for the kitten, but Blu grabs the kitten's tail and swings it until the tail comes off. He tortures the kitten to show his dissatisfaction with his mother's death and his abandoned situation. Similarly, his neighbors the Reyes sisters are also being neglected by the adults. They not only torture cats but also let a cat eat the canaries in the cage as a subconscious revenge for the negligence of adult's attention. In addition, Blu invents the "fake fainting episodes" in his imaginary drama in order to receive Ivah's attention (26-27). He pretends to be out of breath after running daily errands and collapses in front of his sister. He hopes that Ivah can take a picture of him so that he can see what he looks like while fainting. He also shares his "hanging experience" with Ivah when he tries to play different characters he learns from Western movies. For instance, one day Blu is playing a game with one of the Reyes sisters, Blendaline, and her uncle Paulo. Uncle Paulo ties Blu with a tight clothesline and leaves him alone for hours until Ivah comes to his rescue. Between imagination and reality, Blu somehow prefers

imagination and wishes himself a cartoon character, always worry-free and full of magic power. Later, he hangs on to a knotted sheet dangling from his window as another “hanging experience.” Blu’s behaviors are so reckless that Ivah must constantly keep an eye on him. In order to make Blu stay out of trouble, Ivah overcomes her own fear, for she regards herself as the only person who can protect Blu. Faced with his recklessness, Ivah feels, “It’s a moment in my life that I will remember against my will forever. Him, tied on earth to me. There’s no way for him to escape the house without a mother, the days and nights without a father. No money, no food” (162). However, Blu senses the freedom as an individual. He tells Ivah, “I gotta fly, Ivah, anywhere in this world” (162). Like the canaries in the Reyes’ home, if they stay in the cage, the cat will eventually eat them. If the cage is opened, they have the opportunity to survive.

As a young child reaching the age of puberty, Blu is curious about his sexuality. In order to satisfy his curiosity, Blu turns to Uncle Paulo for answers and secretly goes out with him without Ivah’s disapproval. Intoxicated, Uncle Paulo ties Blu in his Da Sun truck and rapes him.¹⁴ Knowing that Blu must be in trouble, Ivah and Maisie look all around the neighborhood for Uncle Paulo’s red truck in the middle of the night and finally arrive to rescue Blu. Uncle Paulo drives his truck, angrily looking for the Ogata children, who are horrified by the impending danger. Blu is shocked by Uncle Paulo’s sexual violence to him. Seeing Blu traumatized by this violence, Ivah writes, “Blu’s hanging, hanging on, locked in a cloudy embrace with all of us, and for a moment it feels like lost forever in our mother’s arms” (249). Without their mother’s protection,

¹⁴ The “t” between Da and Sun has been scraped off.

this moment intensifies these children's insecurity, their lives hanging together in desperation.

The Ogata children also go through another phase of relieving their melancholia. Empathetic with the pain of losing caretakers, the Ogata children turn to animals to show their love upon them. From their care for animals, they learn about compassion for life. They transfer the love for their mother onto their dog Ka-san, their cat Hoppy Creetat, and the "magical" black cat named Kingdom Come, who they believe can take away the sadness from their father. They are also sensitive to their feelings of abandonment. For example, the Ogatas decide to spend their Thanksgiving with Aunt Betty's family in Hilo, Hawai'i.¹⁵ Before they go, the children do not want to leave behind the cats and dog but have no idea how to handle them. Unable to articulate her worry with words, Maisie "screams, high-pitched and frantic" (68), showing her objection to abandoning the animals. Later, the children help Mrs. Icky, a dog breeder in the community, to clean and groom the dogs. Mrs. Icky leaves her dogs in the dark, dirty basement without giving them proper care, letting them get sick and finally die in the cages. While taking care of the dogs, the Ogata children identify themselves with these mistreated dogs confined and abandoned in a ramshackle environment with limited possibilities in life, just like their own life situations.

In many cultures, people believe that animals possess magic power that can bring luck or disaster to human life. Mama used to tell Ivah that black cats cure sadness and calico cats bring good luck. Her cousin Big Sis also suggests that Ivah find a black

¹⁵ Hilo is the largest community on the Island of Hawai'i and the second largest city in the state.

cat and put it on her father's stomach, and the black cat will absorb all the sadness into itself (83). As Mama and Big Sis both believe in the black cat's magic power, Ivah looks forward to a black cat: "I want *the one* to come to me./The black one who absorbs all sadness./Starting with Poppy" (83). Ivah also learns that the Filipinos believe if a person takes the makapiapia and tears from the dog's eyes, and wipes the mucus into his eyes, he can see ghosts. In the end of Chapter Five, Ivah tries this method and sees her mother's ghost in a white long dress inside Ka-san's red eyes.¹⁶ After seeing her mother's ghost, Ivah feels with a strong conviction that her mother transfers strength to her; she says, "I can be a Mama too" (63).

To some extent, Ivah's melancholia is internalized, compared with her siblings, whose symptoms are more intelligible. After her mother's death, the responsibility of being a surrogate mother for Blu and Maisie has fallen upon her. Every step Ivah takes always reminds her of her mother. In a life without her mother's instructions, Ivah suddenly feels lost and cries for help: "Mama, you died and didn't leave me a damn clue. Teach me how to be a Mama too" (37). Ivah's grievance in this monologue shows her helplessness. The phrase, "Teach me how to be a Mama too," is a refrain in Ivah's narrative, reflecting her strong desire to become an adult capable of taking care of her family. Despite all the protection that she gives her siblings, Ivah somehow forgets her own vulnerability and the fact that she is, after all, a clueless child. In order to "be a Mama," she must grow up overnight.

¹⁶ In fact, the dog's name "Ka-san" means "mother" in Japanese. When the children name the dog "Ka-san," they already suppose that the dog will stay with them as if their mother were still alive. When Ivah sees her mother's ghost in Ka-san's eyes, it confirms to Ivah that Ka-san is her mother's reincarnation.

It is easy to identify children's sensitivity to sudden changes of life and their reaction. After his wife dies, Poppy frequently plays "Moon River" on the piano. Ivah senses this mourning ritual of her father. She writes, "He makes me afraid. *I know where he wants to go. And who the dreammaker is*" (3). To Ivah, Poppy's ritual of playing "Moon River" seems to be his "romantic" self-indulgence in grief and a failure to recover from mourning. Similarly, Maisie can feel the distance of her father. When she tries to write about her feelings as encouraged by her Special Ed teacher Miss Ito, Maisie writes, "iVah iS Ma WHO PuT Me SLeeP. BLu THE oNe WHO SiNG TiLL MY eYeS CLoSe. Ka-SaN iS HeR. HoPPY iS LuCKY. PoPPY iS FaR" (132). Although verbally incompetent, Maisie can feel estranged from her father. Ivah admits that she has been trying to break the family rules, but "Poppy, too tired, doesn't seem to care. Or he's not even at home when the rules get tested and then rewritten by Blu and me" (17). With all the negligence, the children establish their own rules for life.

Besides, children also encounter different life experiences in school with classmates and teachers. In *Blu's Hanging*, the relation between children and school also indicates the conflict between the individual and the institutional system. For Maisie, school life is a nightmare because her muteness makes her teacher look at her as a mentally challenged child. At a parent-teacher meeting Ivah attends on behalf of her father, Miss Tammy Owens comments on Maisie's learning disability. Ivah refers to Miss Owens as "the first one I want to kill" (46) to express her anger when she sees humiliation on Maisie's face: "My sister runs to me with a look on her face I will never forget. Wild, scared eyes and red-faced. And something in me, a rage I have never felt,

courses through my body and rises up to my mouth” (46). This conflict reaches its highest when Ivah starts a fight with Miss Owens, who yells at the sisters: “Filthy-mouthed kids with limited vocabularies” (46). Such a conflict illustrates different levels of discriminations. First, Miss Owens, a Caucasian teacher from continental Texas, considers her “standard English” as superior and looks down upon the native Hawaiian children who use pidgin English in their conversation. She believes a person who cannot speak “standard English” is less intelligent, and overlooks the fact that Maisie’s muteness is a traumatic symptom caused by her mother’s death. Because of that, Maisie is sent to the Special Education Program. In contrast to Miss Owens, the Special Ed teacher, Miss Ito, appears as a tender mother figure. She helps Maisie regain her language capability and guides Ivah to connect with mainstream education. Maisie and Ivah both follow Miss Ito’s guidance to fit into mainstream society. As a mother surrogate, Miss Ito helps reinitiate the mother-child connection the children lose after their mother’s death. This connection is also a trope in terms of the relation between Hawai‘i and the continental U.S. As geopolitically isolated from the Mainland, Hawai‘i seems like a child left alone by her mother. The connection between mother and child in *Blu’s Hanging* symbolically suggests the negotiation of Hawai‘i’s political status that seeks alliance with the Mainland, the mother country, instead of being isolated from her.

Meanwhile, the language reflects a hiatus between Hawai‘i and the Mainland. It does not occur to Miss Owens that pidgin English is an essential part of local identity. Miss Owens’s prejudice against pidgin English shows her white supremacism toward

Hawai'i, which evokes Ivah's strong defense for her local identity. For children growing up in a multilingual community, code switching is an important linguistic agency. In the telephone conversation, Ivah hears that "Poppy talks in perfect English on the phone" about the school conference (57), while in private he speaks pidgin English. Ivah is also capable of switching codes from pidgin to "standard English," but during the parent-teacher conference, Ivah refuses to use it to accommodate Miss Owens's arrogance. Ivah's nonconformity manifests a cultural resistance against assimilation into mainstream verbal communication standards. Moreover, this standard-pidgin linguistic binary shows the tension between the standardization of mainstream society and the linguistic heterogeneity of Hawai'i. The pioneer Hawaiian author Milton Murayama (author of *All I Asking For Is My Body*) rejected mainstream publisher's correction and persisted with pidgin expression in his novel. He eventually decided to publish his novel by himself. Similarly, Yamanaka also maintains her writing style with pidgin English in her books. This resistance against the language standardization shows their strong Hawaiian identity built upon linguistic and racial diversity.

Being able to master the standard language is one of the important elements in assimilating into mainstream society. Ivah strongly identifies herself with the local Hawaiian pidgin English as opposed to the mainland "standard English." The ability to switch back and forth between pidgin English and "standard English," like her fluid identity as an Asian American in Hawai'i, gives her freedom to manage languages at her will. Her later decision to pursue an education at Mid-Pacific Institute illustrates her

freedom as an individual despite her father's disapproval.¹⁷ Poppy disapproves of her pursuit for education in Honolulu because he is concerned that Ivah would become part of the mainstream society and eventually abandon her cultural origin. He expresses this thought when he asks Ivah to attend the parent-teacher conference for him:

I no can handle haoles. Think they so holier-than-thou with their fast-talking mouth and everybody mo' brown than them is dirt under their feet. All the lunas all haole before on the sugar plantation—they mean sunnavabitches with bullwhips for hit the kids and all. And they live in the biggest, most nicest house made special for the plantation bosses. Then they made some of the Portagees lunas. The damn Portagees was workers like us, but they was the closest to white. (57-58)

Poppy abhors the unequal treatment he has encountered in the sugar plantation, where the Portuguese are better treated than the Asians. By extension, he is concerned not only that Ivah is unable to take care of her siblings, but also about that Ivah may be "haolified." Davis points out:

The Asian American child's need to identify with the American ethos of individual freedom—which includes the liberty to choose his or her cultural affiliation—becomes part of the itinerary of subjectivity. Further, apart from familial demands, the child must negotiate acceptance in school and the peer community, a quest that often involves the acquisition of language. (167)

¹⁷ Located in Honolulu, Mid-Pacific Institute is a private, independent coeducational college preparatory

This ambivalence seems inevitable. Being able to communicate in “standard English” is a powerful cultural capital that minority members strive to achieve in order to fit into mainstream society. With the ability to speak “standard English,” Ivah’s decision to go to the Mid-Pac and her later pursuit of college education in the mainland will facilitate her assimilation.

Assimilation does not always suggest the loss of one’s cultural identity. Living in a multiethnic and multilingual community of Moloka‘i where Filipinos, Japanese, Portuguese, and native Hawaiians reside, the Ogata children are clear about their ethnic/racial difference from others. They are Japanese, and the Reyes sisters are half Japanese and half Filipino. Ivah’s classmate Mitchell Oliviere is Portuguese, while the teachers from the Mainland and the new priest Jim are Caucasian. When Blu asks Ivah to go to church with him, Ivah says, “I not Baptist, Blu. I with you” and “We nothing...Nothing but us” (226). Maisie also supports Ivah that they are “Japanee.” Ivah understands matter-of-factly, “My brother, the Buddhis. My sister, Japanese. Me, I’m with them, Ka-san, Hoppy, and four kittens. All of us sleeping on a bed of golden pennies” (226). She has a strong identification with her cultural heritage and belief. As long as her firm identification as a member of the Asian/Japanese minority in Hawai‘i remains, the assimilation will not create conflict with her ethnic identity.

The relation between Hawai‘i and the continental U.S. is a significant leitmotif in *Blu’s Hanging*, for it involves a different level of political issue that has been obscured in public history. When Ivah claims, “There’s very little we don’t know” (25)

education to Pre-K through 12th grade students, generally known as “Mid-Pac.”

to show her observation of her living environment and people's inside secrets, it is ironic that she is totally ignorant about her internal family secret of disease and shame. It has been an open secret in the community that Ivah's parents had leprosy. As the story evolves, this family secret is uncovered little by little. Ivah initially mentions leprosy evasively when she remembers rubbing cocoa butter into "the shiny rivers of scars" on her mother's body, which, Ivah writes, "would map my way home to her body, I was sure, should I ever get lost. I didn't want them to fade into the smoothness of her skin, but she wanted no trace of them" (44-45). The personal trauma of illness has etched scars on the mother's body. The daughter reinscribes this trauma as a map that helps find her mother's past. In a sense, the scars have formed a historical map that narrates the leprosy patient's unbearable trauma in the past.¹⁸ In order to protect their children from discrimination because they are the descendants of lepers, the parents repress this traumatic secret. While touching the scars on her mother's hands and face, Ivah remembers, "Scars that Maisie, Blu, and I never had on our hands or faces. But hands that Mama and Poppy hid in their pockets. And faces turned down, shamed eyes" (51). There is a historical rupture between two generations, a rupture, which, like the hidden secrets in history, must eventually be reconnected and reinscribed. Centered in Ivah's narration is this hidden historical/family secret about the time leprosy patients were segregated in Hawai'i. This traumatic experience becomes a cornerstone that

¹⁸ The metaphor of scars on the body suggests one's traumatic past recorded in corporeal marks. This metaphor is also presented in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*, in which Mai's mother Thanh has scars caused by the burn of napalm in Vietnam.

accounts for Poppy's lasting depression and the reason why the Ogatas are estranged from other families in the community.

The children's father, Bertram Ogata, has been suffering from the trauma of his leprosy. His wife Eleanor also contracted leprosy at a very young age. Their families had to send them to the infamous leper colony peninsula, Kalaupapa, for a segregated treatment. The history of leprosy in Bertram and Eleanor also causes their children to be isolated. The scars etched on the body are the living proof of the leper's traumatic past. Although the scars on the body are not hereditary and a cure for leprosy has been found, the shame of leprosy can be transferred to the next generation. Semantically, the word "leper" means not only the leprosy patient but also the outcast rejected and avoided by the society. Both connotations are exemplary in the experience of Bertram and Eleanor. When sulfone was introduced to cure leprosy, Eleanor kept taking it impulsively even though she had recovered. She was afraid to return to the state where she had to separate from her children, so she overdosed sulfone regardless of the side effects that damaged her body. Eleanor impulsively takes sulfone because she wants to become healthy in hopes of "becoming fully integrated into the community, someone who was capable of participating in and perpetuating her society through her ability to raise a 'perfect' family" (Suzuki 41). Unfortunately, the scars, the permanent markings on the body, are the constant reminder of her rejection by people. Eleanor's desire for assimilation also implies the difficulty for Asian minorities to integrate into mainstream society because of their racial markings (or different physical attributes from Caucasians) onto which people project stereotypes and presumptions.

This family trauma is embedded within an obscured part of the history of Hawai'i. As Emily Russell indicates, from 1865 till 1969, Hawaiians who contracted leprosy were exiled to the Kalaupapa Peninsula (53). They were stereotyped as lazy, unclean, and promiscuous. After recovery, the ex-patients still worry about those stereotypes. A once leprous body will always be an abjected body by the society. What is worse, "the current residents of Kalaupapa serve interchangeable positions as the living representations of past patients and the embodiment of leprosy's ongoing stigma; they cannot escape from their association with disease" (Russell 63). What these ex-patients have lost is not only their family and friends but also their dignity as human beings.

Because of negative stereotypes, the leprosy history in the Ogatas brings to the younger generation a burden of shame. In one scene, the Ogata children try to take away the dogs from Mrs. Icky because they cannot bear to see them mistreated. Mrs. Icky yells at them, "You goddamn filthy kids got leprosy in your veins" (191). In terms of Poppy's leprosy history, Russell comments, "Bertram Ogata's scars become a figure of the body's tendency to carry and display social stigma. The 'huge, shiny scars on his hands' symbolize the persistent mark of disease on the body, even after literal cure" (64). When Bertram knows that Blu was raped by Uncle Paulo, he feels particularly humiliated because his only son is carrying the stereotype of promiscuity of a leprous body and the social taboo of homosexuality.

Despite the trauma and suffering of the child characters throughout the novel, we see the growth of the Ogata children and their ultimate acceptance of their mother's

death in the end. As Miss Ito tells Ivah, “Sometimes, you’ve got to let go. Otherwise, what you’re holding on to suffocates and dies. You kill yourself and the ones you love so much” (134), Ivah learns to release her worries for family and the trauma inherited from her parents. Her decision to go to the Mid-Pac shows her maturity and capability of choosing the life path for her best interest. She also realizes that she cannot always protect her siblings, as she writes, “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). Meanwhile, an epiphany occurs to Blu when he returns home after rescued by his sisters from Uncle Paulo’s rape. He sees the illusion of his mother staying near him like a guardian angel. However, Blu yells, “Mama, go...Mama, you gotta go to the light of the Buddha, the light of Jesus—both feel same, feel warm, you cannot miss um” (249). When Poppy is drunk and walks down the street, “Ka-san scurries down the drive way and stops. She takes one last look at the three of us, her eyes red, a fire, a light. Then she runs down the street after Poppy. [...] He’s going to find her, to walk with her, to dance with her, but she’s walking behind him” (259-60). At this moment, Blu suddenly realizes, “Mama gotta find her way to heaven, not home.” He directs her mother’s spirit, “Mama...Heaven ain’t here” (260). This touching gesture shows Blu accepts the loss of his mother and he should move on and stop haunted by the idea of his mother.

The phrase “Heaven ain’t here” also deconstructs people’s exoticized image of the “Blue Hawaii” that Hawai‘i is not heaven—it is a place burdened with poverty and the history of leprosy. Suzuki elaborates on this idea:

Yamanaka's depiction of the violence, poverty, and cruelty of this local society works to contradict the myth of the idyllic island paradise and multiculturalist utopia of "mainland" American (and Asian American) fantasies; in this context, the constant and repetitive consumption of food, medicines, and cultural products reveals the way that the novel's protagonists become consumers as a means of negotiating subjectivity within the boundaries of society defined by the prior loss of an idealized past. (36-37)

Suzuki argues that the author intends to demystify people's exoticization of Hawai'i, which muffles the historical truth about Hawai'i and the melancholia that former leprosy patients suffer. As mentioned earlier, Freud's remark of melancholia as a pathological symptom is an oversimplified account without considering the contextuality of melancholia. As shown in *Blu's Hanging*, melancholia is not merely an individualized psychosomatic symptom but also a state of signification that tells the stories of people's suffering—their loss, relegation, isolation, and destitution of life situation—in a certain sociopolitical context.

The Jade Peony

Many critics complement the narratives of *The Jade Peony*. Merle Rubin calls this novel "one of the many fascinating accounts—fictional and nonfiction—that have been appearing about the lives of Asian-American immigrants. It is also one of the best-written and most imaginatively conceived of these accounts." John Bemrose sees this

novel as “one of the finest works of fiction yet to break the silence that surrounds so many of the country’s immigrant communities.” Scholar of Asian Canadian literature Eleanor Ty focuses on Choy’s subtlety in dealing with ethnic issue in the novel, as she notes, “Choy grapples with issues of ethnic identity in North American society, and the ways in which collective memory, history, and storytelling interact, and sometimes clash, with the gaze and expectations of the dominant culture in the construction of this identity” (116). Indeed, both extrinsically and intrinsically, *The Jade Peony* achieves a unique narrative technique. The novel is composed of, in Eleanor Ty’s term, “multiple monologue narratives” by three child protagonists in a Chinese Canadian family of Vancouver’s Chinatown. The three child narrators—Jook-Liang (Liang), Jung-Sum (Jung), and Sek-Lung (Sekky)—develop different life experiences with the people they encounter while establishing their subjectivity. Inserted in the three narrative sections are Wayson Choy’s authorial comments on the government’s treatment of Chinese labor and unequal immigration policies that silence the Chinese minority in Canada.

The child characters’ traumatic experiences in *The Jade Peony* deal primarily with losses. In terms of loss and absence, Dominick LaCapra explains, “When absence itself is narrativized, it is perhaps necessarily identified with loss (for example, the loss of innocence, full community, or unity with the mother) and even figured as an event or derived from one (as in the story of the Fall or the oedipal scenario)” (701). There is no clear distinction between loss and absence. However, “losses may entail absences, but the converse need not be the case” because “one cannot lose what one never had” (700, 701). He also elaborates that on the transhistorical level, absence does not imply

temporality—that is, *absence* does not require coordination with past, present or future because *it* suggests the primordial void that has no relevance with the flow of time. “By contrast, the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future” (700). Namely, *loss* has a retrievable causation from historical past. Furthermore, LaCapra relates loss to *lack*, which is different from absence. He explains, “Loss is often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. A lost object is one that may be felt to be lacking, although a lack need not necessarily involve a loss. Lack nonetheless indicates a felt need or a deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing” (701).

The three children in *The Jade Peony* have been informed by their elders that there is something missing in their lives. In other words, elders believe that these children are born with a lack. This lack suggests the loss of their ethnicity, that is, their lack of Chineseness as Canadian-born children. In LaCapra’s rendering, absence suggests something that never exists, while loss means something that used to exist but disappears. Immigrant parents believe that their children’s Chineseness should exist from birth, but their Canadian-born children are gradually losing it. These parents also believe this loss can be restored by giving proper education of traditional Chinese culture and history. However, I argue that, except for their visible physical features, their Chineseness is originally nonexistent. If anything, their Chineseness is implanted by force. They eat Chinese food or study Chinese language and literature, but their cultural input is from diverse sources. With the influence of western culture, it is easy to

follow the western standard and devalue their culture of origin, especially when their culture of origin is depreciated and ignored in mainstream society.

Such an imposition of loss generates a sense of inferiority in the minds of children. They grow up in an ethnic community where they have to struggle with this predestined loss/lack. In Liang's story, one can see the intense conflict between Liang and Poh-Poh, or Grandmother. Poh-Poh expects Liang to behave like a Chinese girl who understands Chinese traditions and manners. As a five-year-old girl, Liang abounds with innocent fantasies and imaginations in her mind; being a "Chinese" girl is simply an abstract concept beyond her imagination. Her understanding of reality and illusion is acculturated with both eastern and western influences. When she first sees the visitor of their family, Wong Kimlein (later "Wong Suk"), Liang imagines him as Monkey King because of his distinctive facial characteristic: "narrow at the top and wide at the bottom; this face, like those carved wooden masks sold during the Year of the Monkey" (23). His face is so famous that everyone in Chinatown knows about him. Liang associates her knowledge about Monkey King in the well-known Chinese classic with monkey-faced Wong Suk. However, the Tarzan movies she has seen also make her fantasize Wong Suk as Cheetah, Tarzan's animal companion. This hybridized imagination is a common feature for a minority child growing up in a cross-cultural environment.

Liang's innocence reminds Poh-Poh of her own childhood experience in Old China. Working as a maid since a young girl, Poh-Poh knows nothing about an innocent childhood. In her haunted memories, she was forced to grow up rapidly and learn all the

household chores, such as cleaning, cooking, and needlework, to serve her adopted family in order to survive. At one point, Liang asks Poh-Poh to teach her how to make the beautiful ribbon knots that Poh-Poh has made on the skirt. With several attempts, Poh-Poh gives up and cries, “No more teach.” She is frustrated with Liang’s clumsy fingers at needlework. However, Poh-Poh is also aware that, unlike her own childhood where she had to “learn or die” (35), Liang has no such an imperative. In Poh-Poh’s experience, there is no time to dream because life is always a reality; anything irrelevant to survival and productivity is extravagance. This is why Liang’s daydream of becoming Shirley Temple upsets Poh-Poh; it is un-Chinese for Liang to act like a white girl. What Poh-Poh can only see in Liang’s innocence is useless daydreaming and waste of time—in a nutshell, *mo yung*, or useless, until Wong Suk appears in Liang’s life.

Wong Suk’s presence serves two significant purposes in Liang’s story. First, Wong Suk appreciates Liang’s innocence and buffers the tension between Poh-Poh and Liang. Despite Poh-Poh’s constant nagging, Liang never stops her positive attitude and her innocent dreams because of Wong Suk’s encouragement and support. Wong Suk can see Liang’s special personality, commenting that Liang is “tiger-willed” (28). For Liang as a young girl who needs attention from adults, Wong Suk’s presence makes her feel self-confident, as opposed to indulging herself in inferiority like Poh-Poh. Her life is no longer surrounded only by Poh-Poh’s Old-China doctrines, but by someone who can appreciate new ideas. In her narrative, Liang reflects that she has been neglected by the family: “When I was six, Grandmother already had me folding diapers for Sekky, and when I cried, I cried on my own” (62). As the only girl at the age of five with two

elder brothers in the family, she barely has any friends to play with, except for her imaginary friendship with Shirley Temple. Being a girl child in a traditionally sexist family, Liang is aware of her unimportance. Therefore, Wong Suk becomes Liang's best friend, reminding her of her self-worth.

With her tiger-willed personality, Liang disregards Poh-Poh's fatalism and her Old-China ideology that being born a girl-child is useless. She also rejects Poh-Poh's attempt to indoctrinate such a negative concept into her mind. Tired of Poh-Poh's stories of "the old days, the old ways" (40), Liang feels like escaping from the old symbolic confinement. There are many times that she screams in her mind, "This is Canada, not Old China" (31), to show her disagreement with Poh-Poh, who constantly reminds Liang of her own traumatic past in China. Liang argues, "Father says after the war is over, things will change for everybody, even girls" (36). Having experienced famines and wars in China, Poh-Poh's memories are fixed in the traumatic past. She believes there are wars everywhere but in Chinatown. Against Liang's identification with Canada, Poh-Poh insists that Liang be a Chinese girl who follows the "Chinese way." She tells Liang, "You not Canada...you China" (36). Poh-Poh, like the old-timers in Chinatown, still adheres to the traditional patriarchal sexism that boys are better than girls. However, Liang never wants to compromise with this ideology. Hearing Poh-Poh's Old-China stories about poor girls sold to rich families to be slaves, Liang knows that in Canada, she will not be enslaved; instead, she wants to have total control of her own life. She sympathizes with the poor Chinese girls in Poh-Poh's stories, but she

knows she will never become one of them. Liang believes that like boys, girls can achieve something in Canada.

By introducing Wong Suk, Liang's story also takes readers back to the Chinese Canadian history about retired railroad workers who survive backbreaking labor, and revives the grandeur of these anonymous heroes buried in Canadian history. Children are fascinated by Wong Suk's talk-stories and adventures about his labor to build the last section of the Canadian Pacific Railroad in the interior of British Columbia after 1885. In contrast to Poh-Poh, who always overwhelms Liang with her miserable, heart-cramping stories about China, Wong Suk talks little about his earlier times in Old China. Perhaps, for Wong Suk, his actual life histories, just like most old-timers in Chinatown, are buried "within those fortress walls. Only paper histories remained, histories blended with talk-story" (50). Old-timers' past is always a mystery in Chinatown. As the narrative goes, "Everyone knew everyone's daily business, but not always everyone's past" (59). The past of old-timers is erased and rewritten, with the newly-created identity which secures their legal residency in Canada. Everyone is in different disguises; no one talks about his/her real identity. The adults are cautious with children around when they talk about Wong Suk's paper documents. Sometimes an innocent mouth can cause unexpected disaster if children know too much about fake identities and paper families. So, Wong Suk's life in Old China remains a mystery to the children.

The encounter of Liang and Wong Suk suggests a connection between old and young generations. This connection discloses the unwritten history about Chinese

Canadian laborers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wong Suk is not merely a man with a monkey face but also a representative railroad worker in the missing legend of Chinese Canadian history. Beyond the traditional father-daughter relation, the connection between Wong Suk and Liang suggests Liang as a Canadian-born Chinese looking for a legend—a father figure that reinitiates the Chinese Canadian part of national history.

Second Brother Jung-Sum's narrative is confessional in content. It reviews his childhood trauma and reveals his homosexual feeling for a young man senior to him. Before being adopted at the age of four, Jung-Sum has gone through many traumatic moments. At a young age, Jung has already lost his birth parents. Given that no one in Jung's adoptive family talks about his birth parents, the images that he shares with his birth parents are gradually fading away. In his narrative, Jung recalls the traumatic moment when he lay in his dead mother's arms and wet his pants until people found him in the house. In the beginning of Jung's story, the description of the reddish scars on Jung's back hints at his physical trauma. Later, his memory of physical abuse by his birth father is triggered during the fight with Frank Yuen, the man Jung has feelings for.

Jung's traumatic experiences, as the story evolves, are uncovered layer by layer. His weak physical constitution makes him self-conscious about developing strength to eradicate people's impression of his physical weakness. As time progresses, Jung's narrative relates more with his mental and physical transition from puberty into adulthood and his pursuit of masculinity. He worships Joe Louis the boxer; he also envies how old men in Chinatown remember that their hands have started to form

calluses at a young age because of hard labor, while at ten, his own hands are still smooth like silk (72). His attention to the physical signs of masculinity illustrates his eagerness to turn into an adult. One way to show the autonomy of an adult is to claim his possessions, for owning objects is proof that one is old enough to control his belongings. For example, after Jung's *Dai Kew*, or Big Uncle, gets off from his kitchen duty on the cruise ship, he visits Jung's family with a turtle in a wooden crate. When Jung sees the turtle, he immediately thinks, "*The turtle was going to be mine!*" (75). He learns that people working in the woods always own a pet, so he strongly desires to claim this turtle. With a pet, he feels more like a grown man. Jung also expects that once becoming an adult, he can slough off his physical weakness in childhood. His emaciated physical condition drew Grandmother's attention when she first met him. Seeing his skinny body, Grandmother wondered if he ever ate. In order to show his toughness and independence, young Jung repeated, "I feed myself" (83). First Brother Kiam told him that he was too weak to be his brother, and planned to help Jung become strong and tough to defend himself. One of Kiam's rules to Jung is "not being a sissy" (86). In order to become physically strong and masculine, Jung starts to practice boxing at the gym and devotes himself to martial arts and sports.

As a boy growing up with the heteronormative ideology, Jung has been struggling with the idea of masculinity. His desire to become tough also exemplifies his eager identification with manhood as it is defined in the patriarchal world. When people gossip about the dry-cleaner Gee Sook, who has never been married, neighbor Mabel Tam comments, "It's a natural law that all men should marry!" (96). Although there is

no further elaboration on this gossip in the story, it implicitly insinuates Gee Sook's "deviation" in remaining single. On the other hand, Jung notices how Kiam tries to stay away from the influence of women: "Kiam belonged more and more to Father, to Third Uncle, to the men of Chinatown who knew the worth of a well-trained and well-mannered First Son....Kiam spent more time with men, and Liang, and Sekky and I spent more time with Stepmother and Grandmother. He was the First Son" (98). In the family hierarchy, Kiam is expected to shoulder the family responsibility, so Jung understands that he will never obtain the same status in the family as Kiam. At the same time, he cannot identify with the females in the family. Therefore, he must reach out to establish his social network with people of "masculine" qualities he can identify with.

The fact that Jung is an adopted child in the family seems to reflect his alterity. In order to find a role model, he turns to Frank Yuen because of their similar childhood background. Both Frank Yuen and Jung lost their mothers and were neglected by their fathers. Frank's father Old Yuen is an alcoholic, which makes him incapable of taking care of Frank. Instead, Frank becomes the one taking care of his father. After growing up, Frank turns into a person who drinks, fights, gambles, and is involved with all kinds of trouble. His notoriety becomes the topic of people's daily conversation in Chinatown. When people talk about Frank's misbehaviors, Jung always hides and listens with great interest. Jung does not hold repulsion for Frank; on the contrary, he idolizes Frank for his rebellion. Jung says, "I listened to every word about Frank Yuen; he was someone to admire, a survivor" (110). Jung admires Frank also because he invents his own history and earns a "reputation." By contrast, Jung has lost his birth parents and family history.

Even though he is adopted by a new family, his own history has faded away. Both admiration and envy arise inside Jung toward Frank, who is “Old Yuen’s only son for his unfeeling independence; the history of his family troubles, however bad, was a history I did not have” (110). Jung refers to Frank as “one of the porcelain gods” (114, 117) that he feels respect and awe for. Given that Frank knows everything about violence and boxing, Jung worships him as a role model, regardless of Grandmother’s disapproval.

In Jung’s narrative about his fight with Frank, Jung confesses his homosexual inclination. This first physical contact with another male initiates Jung’s sexuality in his early adolescence. While Jung is practicing boxing alone at the Tong Association’s meeting hall, he does not expect to see Frank there. Frank appears in the hall drunk and challenges Jung with his survival principle that people fight to either win or die: “If you don’t win, you don’t deserve to live” (114). The fight is derived from the primordial animal instinct to claim championship and male superiority. While wrestling with each other, Jung notices a knife Frank hides in his sock. He grabs it swiftly and attempts to stab Frank’s Adam’s apple. There are two explicit symbols of masculinity in this fighting scene: knife and Adam’s apple. In the beginning, the knife belongs to Frank, who carries it to demonstrate his domineering masculine power. Jung then turns to snatch the knife from Frank, trying to stab Frank’s Adam’s apple as a threat to his masculinity. This fight clearly illustrates Jung’s internal desire to survive, which is his only option at this crucial life-death situation. However, this situation also triggers Jung’s traumatic memory to resurface—the memory “of something hard hitting my

back, its metal sharpness ripping flesh; a strap whipping lines of fire across my back” (116). The physical pain that he experiences during the fight triggers Jung’s trauma of the physical abuse by his birth father. At that moment, in the dark meeting hall, the past and the present are mixed, and Jung unravels his vulnerability as a traumatized child under life-threatening circumstances. Unexpectedly, Frank embraces him, rocking him in his arms to comfort him from hysterical breakdown. The smell of sweat and tobacco on Frank’s body, as well as his tenderness, gives Jung a unique sensation that he has never experienced before, as he describes:

...my whole body suddenly lit with an unbidden, shuddering tension; a strange yearning awoke in me, a vivid longing rose relentlessly from the centre of my groin, sensuous and craving, rising until my hands unclenched, throwing me forward, soundlessly, until my fingers tingled and stretched to grope the raw tactile air. (117)

This moment exemplifies that Jung is growing out of his innocent childhood and discovering his sexuality. After the fight, Jung wins not only the title “Champ” from Frank but also his camaraderie, trust, and affection.

For a child like Jung going through a transitional phase of life, having such a strong sensation for the same sex can be a shock. As he has been indoctrinated with the heteronormative ideology, this sensual feeling for another male is a forbidden desire. Jung’s ambivalence about his sexuality shows that on the one hand, Jung yearns for Frank’s affection, “thirsting for the sensations that were already leaving [him]” (121); on the other hand, he tries to push Frank away, because the same forbidden feeling on

that fighting night always comes back to him whenever Frank is around. At the farewell party to send off Frank to the Marines, Frank gives Jung the gold watch he has been wearing for a long time. This gift becomes an important bestowal to Jung. It represents Frank, the man who initiates Jung's sexuality and sensation for male affection and bodies. It also symbolizes Frank's steely masculinity that Jung admires. After Frank eventually joins the Marine Corps, Jung is doomed to lose his object of affection. With Frank's leaving, Jung starts his life as an independent young man and learns to take care of himself. Grandmother understands the special meaning of the gold watch and allows Jung to put this souvenir in her silk bag that she uses to keep her jade pieces. Jung's discovery of his homosexual inclination confirms Grandmother's foresight that he is *yin*, the moon, the feminine. Although this *yin-yang* gender binary represents a cultural ideology that rules gender performance, Grandmother does not make any judgment about Jung's *yin* force; instead, her wisdom reminds Jung that "moon people *felt* things...that others did not name" (123). All of a sudden, Jung feels connected with Grandmother's old-time wisdom about human life.

Compared with the first two narratives, Sek-Lung's narrative encompasses more complicated political issues, such as national and ethnic identities of Canadian-born children, and interracial relationships. As the youngest child in the family, Sek-Lung's "lack" is both physical and psychological. His physical lack derives from a lung infection at his birth. In the eyes of old-timers, Sek-Lung is not only physically weak, but his understanding of Chineseness is also completely missing. For this reason, Grandmother and Stepmother always think of Sek-Lung as *mo no*, or brainless, for he

cannot call his relatives by the correct titles. For Sek-Lung, being able to follow the complicated Chinese rankings for acquaintances and relatives is much more difficult than the western way. He is confused with those “paper sons” and “paper uncles,” whom people in Chinatown call “the others.” The complicated kinship causes an identity crisis for Sek-Lung, who wonders if he prefers to be Chinese or Canadian. Christopher Lee notes, “Sekky encounters Chineseness as a lived reality, as ethnicity is made a daily reality through interaction with his elders” (20). Because this reality causes frustration to him, Sek-Lung identifies himself as Canadian more than Chinese. For example, he prefers English to Chinese, for “English words seemed more forthright to [him], blunt, like road signs. Chinese words were awkward and messy, like quicksand” (134). He identifies himself with the English language and the adopted nickname “Sekky” that his schoolteacher gives him. With his identification with English, he even wishes he could physically transform into Caucasian, as he confesses, “I sometimes wished that my skin would turn white, my hair go brown, my eyes widen and turn blue, and Mr. and Mrs. O’Connor next door would adopt me and I would be Jack O’Connor’s little brother” (134). This self-reflexive abnegation of his ethnicity and physical features shows minority children’s identity crisis. They understand their inferior social status in a predominantly white society, so they wish to be “whitened” and assimilate into mainstream society.

Sekky’s lack also relates to his ignorance about the “secrets” in Chinatown. Residents of Chinatown believe that once they are in Canada, they are safe from the wars, famines, and droughts in Old China. They fabricate papers and documents that

can prove their kinship with legal Canadian residents so that they stay in Canada legally. Thus, there are secrets about “paper relatives” that the adults try to hide from their Canadian-born children, who, unaware of the importance of keeping secrets, can betray those paper relatives inadvertently.¹⁹ This reflects adults’ concern about Canadian-born children, as Sekky describes, “All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born ‘neither this nor that’, neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no*—no brain” (135). Sekky is not totally ignorant of the complicity of the adult world. He knows clearly that immigrant parents always worry that their Canadian-born children fail to maintain their ethnic heritage and gradually lose their Chineseness. Although Father emphasizes keeping things simple, Sekky understands that nothing can remain simple. While questioning about his identity, he understands his situation of being Chinese in a white-dominated society: “I was the Canadian-born child of unwanted immigrants who were not allowed to become citizens. The words RESIDENT ALIEN were stamped on my birth certificate, as if I were a loitering stranger” (135-36). This inferiority originated from the Exclusion Law that the Canadian government imposed in the early twentieth century to forbid Chinese immigrants from entering Canada. Even those who had lived in Canada were still regarded as resident aliens without legal citizenship, due

¹⁹ “Paper identity” refers to immigrants who use fake identity papers to prove their kinship with those who already successfully obtain permanent residency or citizenship in the United States or Canada. According to immigration laws, kinship usually vouches for a person’s family connection and thereby can grant a person legal status to stay in the United States or Canada. In Chapter One, Leon Leong in Ng’s *Bone* uses the same way to become Grandpa Leong’s “paper son” in order to gain legal status in the United States. In Choy’s *The Jade Peony*, the children’s father is involved with handling the documents of “paper relatives.” For fear that children might accidentally reveal the secrets, the adults are usually cautious of their children’s presence when discussing “paper relatives.”

to their racial difference. Such inferiority is constructed by political prejudice against non-white minorities. It also causes identity issues and influences psychological development for the minority generations born in Canada.

The external social factors make Sekky inferior for being Chinese. He describes how hostile the political situation that discriminates against the Chinese, and how only white Canadian citizens could qualify as professionals in the 1920s and 1930s. He hears the joke that goes, "...if you drop a plate in a restaurant, a dozen Chinks will answer!" (140). This racial joke illustrates the lower social status of Chinese as service boys. With this awareness of ethnic disadvantage, the more Sekky is forced to reconstruct his Chineseness, the more he resists. He thinks, "I wished I were someone else, someone like Freddy Bartholomew, who was rich and lived in a grand house and did not have to know a single Chinese word" (140). The lack of social identity and political recognition for the Asian minority is deep traumatization. For example, the postman delivers a registered parcel and asks Stepmother to make an "X" as a signature. Not even bothering to ask if she can sign her name, the postman must have assumed Stepmother's illiteracy because she is Chinese. In Sekky's eyes, this X represents Stepmother's identity—it is a non-identity of a Chinese woman who exists as a void in the Canadian society, just like the X, an absence, a non-existence.

Concerned about Sekky's lacking knowledge of his cultural heritage, Stepmother expects her best friend Chen Suling in China to come to Canada and give him a brain—to teach Sekky how to be a Chinese. Chen Suling is a teacher good at both Chinese and English. In Sekky's mind, Chen Suling symbolizes the "orthodox Chinese"

with a sacred but threatening power that is going to rectify his lack of Chineseness and take away his Canadianness. Because of Stepmother's expectation, young Sekky develops his strong resistance against this figure who possesses the power to "convert" him into an "authentic Chinese." He thinks, "*I did, too, have a brain!* There is nothing Suling needed to teach me!" (138). He even claims, "When I got into English school at last, I would conquer my Second Language. I would be a Master of English, better than Chen Suling, even if Miss Chen had ten thousand prizes!" (138). In fact, Chen Suling is a converted Christian, because of which she was ostracized by her family. What she represents is not a stereotypical submissive Chinese woman; instead, she is an individual with a strong will and religious convictions. Stepmother's idealization of Chen Suling only increases Sekky's misunderstanding of this figure. However, as a letter arrives to inform Stepmother of Chen Suling's death during the Japanese bombing in China, Sekky loses this meant-to-be mentor that he has never met in person. Lee remarks that the loss of Chen enables Sekky to "shake off his symbolic identification with her" (23). Chen Suling is expected to teach him to be a Chinese and provide stories about Stepmother that the children barely know about. Unfortunately, after the news of Chen Suling's death, Stepmother never mentions her again, which also closes the opportunity to know about Stepmother's past.

Sek-Lung declares his national identity when describing his school experience with his teacher, Miss Doyle. In an institutionalized system, all the children become a uniform, disciplined troop under the command of the teacher. In particular, during the time of World War II, children are filled with the military ideology. They tend to

associate everything with the current political events. In school, Sekky envisions the whole class like a military unit:

We were an unruly, untidy mixed bunch of immigrants and displaced persons, legal or otherwise, and it was her duty to take our varying fears and insecurities and mold us into some ideal collective functioning together as a military unit with one purpose: to conquer the King's English, to belong at last to a country that she envisioned including all of us. (180)

Education helps Sekky develop his strong national identity in a multicultural setting, as he describes, "At recess, our dialects and accents conflicted, our clothes, heights and handicaps betrayed us, our skin colours and backgrounds clashed, but inside Miss E. Doyle's tightly disciplined kingdom we were all—lions or lambs—equals. We had glimpsed Paradise" (184). This statement from a minority child's mind shows the strong influence of national ideology that molds young children's nationalism. It also reflects Sekky's mindset that he has a resilient tendency to assimilation, starting with the fluency in "King's English" that will lead him to "paradise." Moreover, Miss Doyle's egalitarianism in class is also a microcosm that implies the government's new prospects for the new generations of minority children. On the one hand, her egalitarianism facilitates minority children's assimilation into mainstream culture. On the other hand, this political homogenization dissolves cultural differences of minority children and further reinforces their inferiority and detestation of their own cultural upbringing and language.

As for his ethnic identity, Sekky is challenged by his adventures with his babysitter Meiyong in Japtown during the politically sensitive time of World War II. When Meiyong takes Sekky across the Chinatown border to the Japtown, Sekky senses his fear of being in the territory of the “enemies.” Later, he realizes that Meiyong’s boyfriend Kazuo is actually a Japanese Canadian. When China is brutally ravaged by the Japanese military, people in Chinatown show their resentment against Japanese and boycott Japanese businesses. In his innocent mind, Sekky only knows that it is wrong for Meiyong to have a relation with Kazuo because Japanese are the enemies; he should turn her in for being a “traitor.” However, Sekky gradually changes his mind and feels sympathetic for Meiyong’s situation. He can relate to Meiyong’s frustration at being unable to see Kazuo again because of the ethnic barrier between them. During the day, Meiyong secretly takes Sekky to see Kazuo in Japtown, but Sekky never tells his parents about the transgression Meiyong has made. Sekky’s change of attitude demonstrates that he starts to formulate his individual understanding about human conditions despite the anti-Japanese collective ideology in Chinatown. Meiyong’s story is not about anti-patriotism, but about emotional connection between two human beings regardless of racial/ethnic boundary. Sadly, Meiyong eventually aborts her early pregnancy and ends up killing herself. After the deaths of Grandmother and Chen Suling, Meiyong’s death brings Sek-Lung another experience of loss. Meiyong’s interracial relationship with Kazuo illustrates that individuality is minimized in the group identity because the family, or one’s designated community, is always more important than the self.

However, it is also important to understand that collectivism can fall into irrational political ideologies that fail to look at issues based upon individual concerns.

In the novel, the three child-narrators all have individual mentors. These mentors present different perspectives of reality to these child-narrators and help them understand the complexity of the adult world. Children's understanding of the adult world suggests their mental transformation, particularly through the change of their appearance. Ty claims that the motif of transformation in *The Jade Peony* "acts as a contrapuntal movement that celebrates the power of creativity and resistance, and the possibility of ethnic reinscription" (117). In Liang's story, Shirley Temple was the only child star with whom Liang could identify, since there was no Chinese child star in the 1930s. When Liang puts on the taffeta dress her father bought for her from the bargain store, the shoes with red ribbons Wong Suk bought, and the ribbon knots Poh-Poh made for her on the skirt, she is transformed into the girl that she has been dreaming of becoming. Liang knows that she can never become Shirley Temple with porcelain white skin, blonde hair, and sunny smile, but she is pleased that her family helps fulfill her dream. As Liang is dressed up waiting for Wong Suk to attend the performance, he comes to tell her that he must leave Canada because of his responsibility for bone shipment.²⁰ Traditionally, early Chinese immigrants wish to have their bones shipped back to China after they die. Not knowing the importance of this cultural tradition, Liang cannot accept the fact that Wong Suk must leave her just for "stupid bones." Wong Suk's sudden departure causes the loss of a loved family for whom Liang has

²⁰ See Chapter One, p. 76.

developed strong affection. Even though Liang does not wish Wong Suk to disappear from her life, she learns to accept goodbyes and understands that the group obligation and cultural tradition are more important than individual interests.

Similarly, Jung-Sum's dramatic transformation occurs the moment he puts on the second-hand charcoal coat that Frank's father Old Yuen gives him. When Old Yuen's coat falls on Jung's twelve-year-old shoulders, Jung feels it "like armour" (93). This old coat gives him a sense of security and masculinity. Such a good quality coat would usually cost a regular Chinese worker more than three months' wages, but Old Yuen bought it with his gambling money. He wanted to prove that as a Chinese laborer on minimum wage, he could also afford such an expensive coat at the luxurious men's boutique on Granville Street during the Depression—it is a sense of pride that drives Old Yuen to pay for a classic coat and to surprise the snobbish salesman in a black suit at the boutique. With the help of Stepmother and Gee Sook, who clean and mend the coat, this second-hand coat becomes a military-looking coat at Jung's request. Jung feels reborn with his transformation in this old coat when he looks at himself in Gee Sook's full-length tailor's mirror. He describes:

I felt intense heat embrace my shoulders, then curve over my back and drop upon my chest. I felt like a young warrior receiving the gift of his bright armour, a steely-grey coat born from fire and steam. The coat felt and smelled like new. I wished Frank Yuen could see me. [...] When I pushed my arms through the hot sleeves, the reincarnated coat fell on my

bony shoulders with military precision. I could feel my cheeks redden with pleasure. (101-102)

Like Jewish boys going through bar mitzvah, Jung experiences this new sensation of becoming grown up and a strong, soldierly young man. The remaking of the coat, according to Lorre, “is the centre of a ritual during which Jung receives the attention, mothering and fathering of all, and is reincarnated as much as his coat is. Jung is turning into a champion, a warrior. He will survive” (76). This remaking of the coat becomes a literary metaphor that revives Jung’s life, giving him a new identity as a champion and a survivor from difficult life situations. It is also a political metaphor. As an adopted child, Jung receives a new identity in the family. Similarly, Chinese immigrants leave their home country for Canada and work hard in hopes of being “adopted” by the host country and gaining political recognition of their equal identity.

One shared characteristic of these three child-narrators is their connection with Grandmother. In this matriarchal family where Grandmother holds the power, an ideological split exists. Grandmother represents the traditional Old China with superstitions, myths, and supernatural anecdotes, while Father and Kiam claim scientific reasoning and a realistic mentality. In many aspects, Grandmother seeks to indoctrinate her Old-China ideologies into her Canadian-born grandchildren because she wants them to continue this cultural heritage and tradition. Even though the three child narrators are born in Canada and influenced by western culture, they still feel a strong connection with the wisdom that Grandmother has learned from her life experiences and cultural beliefs. Grandmother used to tell them, “[L]ife itself was loss

and pain and suffering. Who would deny this...was a fool” (124). As shown in their narratives, these children personally experience the loss, the pain, and witness the suffering of others, all of which reflects Grandmother’s wisdom.

Sek-Lung has spent most time with Grandmother during his childhood. His connection with Grandmother, like the relation between Liang and Wong Suk, equally embodies the continuity of the senior generation of the Old World and the younger generation of the New World. Even though Sekky is the most Canadianized child of the family, he does not completely abandon what belongs to the Old World. His siblings try to teach Sekky when he is too sick to go to school, but Sekky admits that Grandmother teaches him more than anyone else. He follows her on Keefer and Pender Streets to look for “splendid junk” as material for their wind-chime project. Collecting the pieces of glass and hiding them under the bed becomes their mutual secret. Sekky describes the time he spent with Grandmother on the wind-chime project: “We would walk up the stairs to her small crowded room. There, in the midst of her antique shawls, the ancestral calligraphy and multicoloured embroidered hangings, beneath the mysterious shelves of sweet-smelling herbs and bitter potions, we would continue making windchimes” (148). After Grandmother’s death, Sekky can still see her spirit around the house and believes her spirit will always stay with him. In presenting the relationship between Grandmother and Sekky, the author Choy does not attempt to create a chasm between the older and the younger generations. Instead, he tries to minimize this generation gap by showing Sekky’s belief in the supernatural force and his acknowledgement of his Chinese Canadian identity as “hyphenated reality,” meaning

that the supernatural and the memory are blended, and that “ghosts are real spirits of the past” (Ty 122, 123).

Grandmother shares her collection of pieces of jade with her grandchildren. She presents her precious carving of a small peony in white and light-red jade and says that it is the color of her spirit (149). She tells Sekky about a white-skinned, white-haired acrobat in China that she had a crush on. Right before she dies, Grandmother sees a long, lean white cat in the yard and goes out to chase it. However, she says it is not a cat—“It was all white and had pink eyes like sacred fire” (150). This reality, mixed with the stories of jade, the myths, and the illusions, reflects Grandmother’s past memory of blended colors. Her past, though full of tragedies, is still vivid with colors. Her patches of memories resemble the wind chimes made up of different color pieces of glass. Like the stories in *The Jade Peony*, each piece of glass represents a story of someone or something in her memory. She rounds them up together to create her own piece of artwork as a souvenir for her family after she passes away. By analogy, this piecing of memories and stories signifies Grandmother’s multilingual skills: “Each dialect opened another reality to them, another time and place they shared” (134). This idea also embodies the nature of heterogeneity in multiculturalism. As the three narratives in the novel demonstrate, this heterogeneity suggests not only the multiplicity of identity for racial minorities but also sexual possibilities beyond heteronormativity. Even though there are losses, pains, and sufferings in life, the living should appreciate their time they can share the joys with their loved ones.

Conclusion

Melancholia is not only a psychopathological symptom but also a cultural construction based upon individual life and contextual factors. If we understand melancholia from a metapsychological viewpoint, melancholia, far beyond being pathological as Freud suggests, is a psychosomatic sign that reinscribes the history of racial/cultural minorities suffering from the prejudice of the dominant group. In *Blu's Hanging*, the children's symptoms of melancholia embody their struggle in dealing with their grief "caused not only by Eleanor's death but also by the limitations set upon them by their class status and their society" (Suzuki 38). The Ogata children represent not only their personal grief, but their disadvantaged social status also illustrates the racial melancholia of Asian Americans in an isolated geographical location like Hawai'i.

In *The Jade Peony*, the child narrators depict the encounter with their mentors during their childhood and their experiences of separation from, and loss of, them. By recounting their childhood experiences, they also review the histories about the hardships of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver's Chinatown during the pre-World War II period. Choy utilizes ethnic minority child characters to demonstrate the alternatives of constructing identities and establishing subjectivity. He also positively presents his perspective on negotiating identity for the visible minorities within a multicultural milieu by connecting the ideas between the old and the new generations. In addition, the blending of multiple voices and genres in the novel crosses the boundaries of literary genres and diversifies the literary expression.

By employing multiple narratorial voices and children's perspective, Yamanaka and Choy both successfully demonstrate the naivety and sensitivity of ethnic minority children in a socio-politically disadvantaged situation. Their mental growth and understanding of the adult world suggest their resistance against, and their negotiation with, the mainstream culture, as well as the construction of ethnic subjectivity. However, assimilation into the mainstream culture does not always negatively suggest the loss of ethnic identity. On the contrary, with the lessons these child characters learn from their mentors and families, they cherish their lives and become confident in their multiple identities. Any form of identification can be ideologically hegemonic. Only flexible, multiple identities are preferable in a culturally diversified society.

CHAPTER 5

FEMALE TRAUMA AND TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS: RUTH L. OZEKI'S *MY YEAR OF MEATS*²¹ AND LYDIA KWA'S *THIS PLACE CALLED ABSENCE*

[I]n fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.

Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

In the previous chapter, I discussed the characteristic narrative convention of Asian North American novels in which different narrators tell stories alternately. Pioneer Asian American writers Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, for example, employed this narrative device in their novels and established this literary convention of Asian North American fiction. This characteristic of multivocality is again used in Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence*. In both novels, multiple narrators from different times and/or places talk about their individual traumatic experiences. These narrators cross the temporal and spatial boundaries, and initiate their dialogues of female experiences in a hegemonic patriarchal society. The novels reflect how transnational/global feminism seeks to incorporate women's

²¹ According to Michael Zyrd's notes, the first edition of the novel is titled *My Year of Meat*. In the second edition published by Penguin in the United States, the word "meat" in the title has changed into a plural form as "meats" in *My Year of Meats* with the author's discretion. However, Zyrd still follows the original title of the novel in his essay.

experiences from all over the world and emphasizes the notion of transnational culturalism that crosses geopolitical boundaries.

Ruth L. Ozeki's novel, *My Year of Meats* (1998), consists of twelve chapters, corresponding to the twelve months in which the narrator-protagonist Jane Tagaki-Little works for the Japanese-based transnational media production of the 1991 TV show, *My American Wife!* Broadcast in Japan, this TV show aims to represent the "authentic" American lifestyles and recipes for beef sponsored by BEEF-EX, the global agribusiness corporate. Jane and her crew travel across the United States looking for wholesome, "All-American" families to be the hosts of the show. Wishing to become a documentary filmmaker but working for a Japanese TV show to make a living, Jane mocks herself that the entire year of working for this project is "My Year of Meats," as the title of the novel suggests. During the shooting sessions, Jane accidentally discovers that the illegal drug DES (diethylstilbestrol) is still used in feedlots to enhance the growth of meat in cattle. This incident also uncovers the personal trauma of Jane's infertility. Jane's mother took a prescription that contained DES during her pregnancy to avoid miscarriage. However, the side-effects of DES has transferred to her daughter Jane and caused Jane's uterine deformity, which makes impregnation almost impossible.

Jane's Japanese counterpart, Akiko Ueno, by contrast, is a typical traditional Japanese housewife married to Jane's manipulative supervisor, Joichi Ueno (also known as "John" in the novel). Joichi asks Akiko to watch every episode of *My American Wife!* and follow the recipes to cook beef for him. Greatly inspired by the

American wives in the TV show, Akiko starts to look into herself, exploring her sexuality and establishing her subjectivity. On the other hand, Joichi requires that Akiko start eating meat to restore her physical condition so that she can be ready for pregnancy. However, Akiko's eating disorders make her menstruation stop, for which she cannot get pregnant for the Ueno family. With disappointment, Joichi becomes bad-tempered and violent, causing psychosomatic trauma to Akiko. Akiko faxes Jane and tells her about the domestic abuse she has been suffering. After being raped by her husband, Akiko decides to leave her husband and fly to New York for a new life.

Singaporean Canadian writer Lydia Kwa's debut novel, *This Place Called Absence* (2000), is about two stories of four women all in first-person narration. Set in Vancouver, 1994, the central story is told by Wu Lan Lam, a Canadian psychologist originally from Singapore. Her father killed himself by swallowing sleeping pills while hospitalized due to an accident at work. After coming back to Vancouver from her father's funeral, Wu Lan falls into deep melancholia. In Singapore, Wu Lan's mother, Mahmee, tells stories about her life with her family and the problem with her husband's ghost that keeps haunting her. After Wu Lan confesses her homosexuality, Mahmee feels confused about her daughter's choice of life. Besides losing her husband, Mahmee also feels worried about losing her daughter and tries to understand and accept her daughter's sexuality. The mother and the daughter are both seeking the reason for the father's suicide and trying to exorcise his haunting spirit.

The other storyline depicts the miserable lives and forbidden love of two prostitutes (or "ah ku"), Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui, in Singapore during the

early twentieth century. Many girls from southern China landed in Singapore, indentured to the sex trade to pay off debts. Ah Choi was sold by her family in order to survive droughts and famines, while Chat Mui, sexually abused by her father, ran away with her cousin Ah Loong to Singapore, where they believed they could find a better life. Ah Choi and Chat Mui fell in love with each other, but they had to keep it secret because of the social taboo of homosexuality. Unable to deal with their unbearable life situations, Ah Choi killed herself by swallowing opium paste in the end, whereas Chat Mui escaped from Singapore to Java, Indonesia. Mediated by Wu Lan's research about prostitutes in early twentieth-century Singapore, these two narratives are interwoven alternately in the novel. Despite the differences of time and space, the similar physical features, experiences of immigration, and sexual orientation, connect Wu Lan with Chat Mui, who both eventually fled to another land for a new life.

The conception of transnational/global feminism is primary theoretical grounds of this chapter. My intent is to provide a general view on how feminisms have progressed to develop global concerns about women's situations. Second-wave feminism has formulated a strong political power for women's rights since its development in the early 1960s in the United States and Europe. However, in the 1980s, non-white feminists argued that so-called feminism was all about white, middle-class, college-educated women engaged in white women's equal rights. White feminisms tend to ignore the differences of race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, and class distinctions, while "Third World feminisms run the risk the marginalization or ghettoization from both mainstream (right and left) and western feminist discourses"

(Mohanty 255). In her 1980 article, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Audre Lorde attacked white feminism’s *other-ization* of women of different race, sexual preference, class, and age; she concluded, “There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word ‘sisterhood’ that does not in fact exist” (375). Concerned about the well-being of women around the world, some feminists assert that “the plurality of feminisms across the globe should be a model for multiple modes of transnationalism, but they have not addressed specifically how feminist visions influence cosmopolitan attempts to navigate between local and global forms of knowledge” (Black 230). Since 1975, feminists have increasingly revised their political and theoretical agendas and broadened their concerns to include all women around the world.²² Consequently, mainstream feminisms have to “critically engage historical change, as well as the tendency towards exclusion in centers of dominance, based on gender, race, class, and gender biases” (Pollock, et al. 584), reach out of the nation-state boundary, and think globally about women’s situations in other countries.

Contemporary feminisms are working to improve women’s rights and living situations around the globe. One of the important characteristics of globalization is that it “favors lateral and nonhierarchical network structure” (Lionnet and Shih 2). Traditionally, nationalism constitutes a one-dimensional provincial view of a nation-state and claims a gendered binary between local and global, between majority and

²² Amrita Basu, “Globalization of the Local/Localization of the Global Mapping Transnational Women’s Movements,” *Meridians* 1.1(2000): 70. In this article, Amrita Basu points out that there are two important phases for international feminism. Between 1975 and 1985, the meaning of feminism had been contested in terms of its relationship between the local and the global. After the Nairobi conference in 1985 and the Beijing conference in 1995, there was an obvious growth of networks linking women’s activism at the local and global levels.

minority, between self and other. As opposed to nationalism, globalization seeks to breach the interstices between nation-states and shortens the cultural distance created by geopolitical barriers. In this sense, feminisms should consider the female gender on an equal level, regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, religion, class, or geographical locations. However, globalization does not aim to homogenize the human race. Instead, as Basu remarks, “In keeping with the multifaceted character of globalization, transnational women’s movements are themselves extremely diverse. A minority among them seek to challenge the feminization of poverty and class inequality that globalization entails” (73). Therefore, transnational/global feminism is dedicated to crossing the boundaries that segregate women around the world. Simultaneously, it also seeks to construct alliances among women and revision Eurocentric feminisms.

The transnational concepts of *My Year of Meats* and *This Place Called Absence* connect the narrators in different cultural milieus, one in North America and the other in an Asian country. Asian American studies critic Shirley Lim suggests that

together with an increased diversity of Asian national representations is a decreased emphasis on categorical national difference. The very multiplicity appears to result in a blurring of national boundaries and an assertion of organizational principles through commonalities of experience rather than differences of attributes. (578)

Multiplicity, in a contemporary sense, is no longer limited in one particular national region. As the idea of multiculturalism expands, people are reaching out globally to look for elements that inspire cultural productions from the influences of other

countries. This centrifugal direction deterritorializes the Eurocentrism that dominates world economy and cultural productions, and that disregards flourishing and hybridization with the inputs of other non-western cultures.

Ozeki and Kwa present a coherent theme of female connections in a transnational and transcultural scenario. In both novels, the central female characters are suffering, physically and psychologically, from the trauma of corporeal (dis)ability. They both deal with the non(re)productivity of female bodies in a heteronormative society. For instance, in *My Year of Meats*, Jane Tagaki-Little has a deformed uterus that cannot incubate a healthy fetus. The second central character Akiko Ueno's anorexic tendency causes the cessation of her periods and the inability to pregnancy. Wu Lan Lam, in *This Place Called Absence*, identifies herself as a lesbian, which suggests her unwillingness to be involved in a heterosexual relationship, and therefore reproduction in her body is impossible. The other female characters, Chat Mui and Ah Choi, use their bodies to make a living. Prostitution is to entertain and satisfy male desire; a prostitute's body is thus not engaged with reproductivity. However, both authors seek to subvert the idea of female reproductivity expected in a heteronormative society that defines the value of a female body. Ozeki and Kwa both argue that reproductivity is not the only way to define a female body. Rather than following patriarchal values, a female body has its own autonomy to generate different meanings and define its subjectivity.

Another distinct characteristic of the novels is their research-based textuality that combines historical and scientific facts with fictional texts. The historical narratives

embedded in fictional texts create the historiographic textuality that integrates the imaginary and the real. Instead of simply writing fictional stories, Ozeki applies her research on American agribusiness to establish credibility of the astonishing trauma that happens to the characters in the novel. Kwa also bases her novel upon the history of immigrants from China through South China Sea to Singapore during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, which is juxtaposed with the protagonist Wu Lan's immigration experience to Canada. In the novel, the depiction of prostitutes' lives during the 1900s also relies upon historical facts. Both authors include bibliographies in the end of the novels. They wish to create their fictional texts not only for their literary accomplishment but also for the credibility of the information they provide in the novels and the ethics of conscientious writers who wish to tell the "truth."

My Year of Meats

In *My Year of Meats*, the character Jane's trauma lies in her infertility. Her deformed uterus not only makes impregnation difficult but also destroys her first marriage. The trauma of infertility makes Jane question her femininity, her biracial identity as a child of interracial parentage, as well as her own interracial relationship. While she was studying the Japanese poet, Sei Shōnagon, at Kyoto University in Japan, Jane met Emil, a black exchange student from France. After Emil finished his master's degree, they got married. However, Jane was diagnosed of a precancerous condition called neoplasia; malignant cells grew in the tissue of her cervix. Although she went through an operation called conization to have the malignancy removed, the doctor

discovered that Jane's uterus was "less triangular" (153) than a healthy one and therefore unable to provide an ideal uterine environment for a fetus to grow. Even though the doctor told her that she could still conceive, there had been no result between her and Emil after several attempts. Given that Emil had impregnated his ex-girlfriend, Jane's deformed uterus was the real problem. They ended up with a divorce because of Jane's barrenness. Jane blames her infertility on her biracial genes. From an ethnological perspective, Jane looks at global migration as a means for racial acculturation, as she narrates:

Being half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we're all going to be brown, sort of. Some days, when I'm feeling grand, I feel brand-new—like a prototype. Back in the olden days, my dad's ancestors got stuck behind the Alps and my mom's on the east side of the Urals. Now, oddly, I straddle this blessed, ever-shrinking world. (15)

Jane's self-reflexive comment about the mixture of races demonstrates her understanding that multicultural and multiracial combinations in global migration are inevitable. The racial boundary is meant to be crossed as geopolitical boundaries break down. Although the racial issue is irrelevant to Jane's infertility, Jane is self-conscious about her racial identity along with genetic acculturation. Given her half-white and half-Japanese descent, Jane snidely compares herself with a mule, a hybrid creature mixed with half horse and half donkey: "Like many hybrids, it seemed, it was destined to be nonreproductive" (152). In this aspect, miscegenation suggests that biraciality, or any material acculturation, could cause "disability" because it is not "pure."

Infertility makes Jane believe that the product of hybridization is doomed to be morbid. According to Judeo-Christian heteronormative values, the main purpose of sex is to reproduce, and sex as a source of pleasure should be discouraged. If a woman cannot conceive, she somehow loses her femininity and the opportunity of being a mother, and thus is seen as useless. As a result, nonreproductivity becomes a stigma and a trauma to infertile women. Faced with this traumatic fact, Jane degrades herself:

I was deformed, barren, and scared. I suspected I might die young, and I didn't think I'd ever be able to view sex as recreational again. Sex is about precision and despair, the antitheses of pleasure. It was a production, and I was the director and had run it ruthlessly. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe my little egg, in the middle of her placid descent, simply recoiled in horror when she saw these beleaguered genetic envoys, joyless and exhausted, bushwhacking their way up my tortuous reproductive tract. So when they finally arrived and came knocking, she slammed her door, and there they died, defeated in the murky, lukewarm threshold of becoming. (158)

Given that Jane is a woman of half-Asian descent, she almost accepts that mixed materiality of her body determines her biological malfunctioning because of her predetermined incompleteness or impurity as a biracial individual. However, to view women's reproductive function as the only way to define their worth is a narrow concept that fails to look beyond biological determinism of a woman's role in society.

As the novel evolves, readers realize that Jane develops a deformed uterus because of the side-effects of DES. The side-effects lead readers back to the history of Jane's mother, who has a physical constitution prone to miscarriage. Jane's mother had four miscarriages before Jane was born. In order to have one successful pregnancy, Jane's mother resorted to medical assistance. Unaware of the potential side-effects of DES, Jane's mother followed the doctor's prescription in hopes of keeping the baby in her womb. Although she successfully gave birth to Jane, her uterus was so damaged that the doctor had to remove it after delivery. The side-effects of DES also caused Jane's intrauterine deformity. Jane condemns her racial impurity and abandons herself to loose sexual relationships. Unexpectedly, Jane gets pregnant from an unprotected sex with her "boyfriend," Sloan the musician. Initially, Jane thinks about an abortion because she never wants a child born out of two irresponsible adults' sexual adventures. On second thought, she decides to keep the baby. The fetus, however, dies in her body because her uterus is too small or because her placenta is too low in the uterus to get sufficient blood for the fetus to grow. The doctor tells her that miscarriage is doomed to happen. After Jane tells Ma about the miscarriage, Ma blames Jane's recklessness of throwing the baby away. Jane in return confronts Ma's ignorance in taking DES. After reconciling with Ma, Jane realizes:

I've always blamed my tendency to vacillate on my mixed ethnicity. Halved, I am neither here nor there, and my understanding of the relativity inherent in the world is built into my genes. Nothing is absolute, and certainly not desire. But knowing this was not enough

anymore. It was time to suspend knowing and decide, What do I want?

What do I want, absolutely, with my whole heart. (314)

The physical traumatization of a female body like Jane's is not just an individual case. It concerns other women who suffer from the same physical disability and the frustration of miscarriages. Finally, via the opportunity of shooting feedlots for the TV show, Jane resolves to find out the truth about illegal hormone used in feedlots that causes physical deformities in human bodies and to help people know more about their vulnerability in the living environment.

Like Jane, the other central protagonist in the novel, Akiko Ueno, also suffers from infertility. Akiko witnesses her parents and brother killed in a car accident, while she is the only survivor. With this family trauma in her memory, Akiko has had difficulty with positive thoughts in life (39). After marriage, Akiko lives in a secluded life without individuality, whereas her husband's words are the laws to be obeyed, and his happiness, the priority. Living in a traditionally patriarchal country like Japan, Akiko barely has an understanding of individuality. Her joys and sorrows depend on her husband's attitudes toward her. Such an unhappy marriage makes Akiko feel stranded and lost, as she starts to question herself: "[A]fter more than three years of marriage, she realized she might have had plenty of desires, but she gave them all up before she even knew what they were" (97). Desires become a luxury for her to fantasize, for even though she has them, they will never be fulfilled in reality under the constraint of her overbearing, abusive husband. Because of her emotionally repressed lifestyle and the

lack of self-esteem, Akiko starts to develop an eating disorder in which she cannot swallow food and has to vomit in the bathroom after eating.

Eating, for most people, is supposed to be an enjoyable part of their lives. In terms of the relation between eating and body, David Bell and Gill Valentine remark, “Eating is an important bodily practice and indeed is one of the most effective ways we can shape and remake the space of our bodies” (23). This intimate relation between eating and body suggests a physical construction and a psychological satisfaction. Akiko’s eating disorder might be a somatic response to her unhappy marriage under the threat of her husband’s violence. However, Akiko’s doctor accuses her of abusing the body by starving herself because she intentionally refuses to conceive. It never occurs to the doctor (who is a male) that an eating disorder could be a symptom derived from multiple factors.

From a socio-cultural viewpoint, the practice of eating is often associated with sexuality. We take in food to satisfy different levels of our desire: to stimulate our palatal sensitivity, to quench the hunger, and to fulfill our need for physical energy; it is a psychosomatic satisfaction for a healthy body condition. Eating and sex usually involve external objects to enter the body and satisfy its desire. Any unhealthy suppression of desire for eating and sex can lead to psychosomatic problems. For eating disorders like bulimia or anorexia, patients suffer not only physically but also psychologically. They either refuse to eat or vomit to purge their bodies ritualistically, which damages their digestive system and affects their mental perception of body images. Given that most cases of eating disorders occur to women, eating disorders in

female bodies can symbolically suggest a physical resistance against external forces. This resistance against the intrusion of external matter denotes that eating-disordered bodies resist food and stereotypical gender roles as receivers during sex based on the anatomical structure. More specifically, eating-disordered bodies that refuse to let the food down implies women's rejection against their position as a receiving object for penetration in sexual intercourse. The intrusion implies the external force of masculinity that seeks to penetrate the feminine body through the orifice; in eating, it is the mouth as the openness, while in sexuality, it is the vagina that serves the receiving function (MacSween 3). In this regard, eating-disordered bodies can also suggest subversive power against the objectification of women's bodies in a patriarchal society. Besides, MacSween suggests:

Desire, for women, is constructed as voracious; feminine desire threatens patriarchal order, it threatens to encompass the (masculine) subject, it threatens chaos. . . . When women threaten to become active subjects, the patriarchal definition of personhood is undermined. Anorexic women are engaged in the project of integrating the individualized/masculine self into the anorexic body, which is feminine; voracious feminine appetites threaten the self and must be eliminated. Feminine desire threatens an end to the dualism of subject and objects. (249)

As a trope, rejecting eating can be construed as an anti-patriarchal act that undermines feminine bodies as the passive subjects that need to be satisfied and completed by

masculinity. When an eating-disordered female body refuses to eat, the male function of “filling” is discredited.

While the purpose of the TV show *My American Wife!* is to advocate meat consumption, eating meat itself is considered a “masculine” behavior in social history. Carol Adams remarks:

People with power have always eaten meat. The aristocracy of Europe consumed large courses filled with every kind of meat while the laborer consumed the complex carbohydrates. Dietary habits proclaim class distinctions, but they proclaim patriarchal distinctions as well. Women, second-class citizens, are more likely to eat what are considered to be second-class foods in a patriarchal culture: vegetables, fruits, and grains rather than meat. The sexism in meat eating recapitulates the class distinctions with an added twist: a mythology permeates all classes that meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male activity. (26)

Furthermore, Adams elaborates upon how meat and vegetable also suggest the physical ability of a person. For example, meat always refers to something alive and active with physical strength, while vegetable suggests someone who “leads a monotonous, passive, or merely physical existence” (36). After Akiko realizes her repressed sexuality and decides to leave her husband, she starts to restore her regular diet by eating meat, which revives her physical constitution. This dramatic physical change is also linked to the show of Christina Bukowsky in an episode of *My American Wife!* After being injured in an accident by a Wal-Mart truck, Christina becomes physically inactive while mentally

conscious. One day, she miraculously wakes up from her vegetative state and asks for lamb chops. Her physical condition starts to change after that. By analogy, Akiko lives a dull, monotonous life as a traditional Japanese housewife, practically like a vegetable with no liveliness and physical ability. Akiko and Christina both change their physical conditions after they start eating meat. Rather than advocating meat-eating, Ozeki attempts to arouse her feminist awareness that women can regain their power through the practice of “masculine tradition.” Meat-eating becomes a trope, suggesting that Akiko and Christina both claim masculine power by eating meat. This miracle that the author creates among the two women characters seems to subvert the patriarchal system that binarizes foods based on different gender roles.

Regarding the interrelation between eating and sexuality, MacSween claims that an eating-disordered body undermines the dualistic definition of masculinity/femininity “through a series of differences or oppositions, but a third category—neutral—intervenes” (3). Moreover, she proposes, “In anorexia women take gender-neutral individuality seriously, working with the social constructions of feminine desire and the feminine body in an attempt to construct an *anorexic body* which resolves gender contradictions in being truly neutral” (4). Physically, the slenderness of an eating-disordered body has replaced the traditional gender distinction based on physical traits of a woman with its *neutral*, androgynous appearance. This concept of gender neutrality echoes Judith Butler’s remarks of gender performativity that “[o]ne is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair” and that “[t]here is no gender identity

behind the expressions of gender; that gender identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Bodies That Matter* 22). An eating-disordered body transgresses the boundary of gender specificity and subverts the stereotypes of a woman’s body. In *My Year of Meats*, Akiko is expected to conceive because her *gendered* body has been expected to fulfill the biological function of reproduction. Her eating disorder implicitly reflects her repressed lesbian inclination. Confused in her sexuality, Akiko eventually realizes that she is never interested in sex with her husband.

Akiko’s eating disorder and her subsequent awareness of homosexuality demonstrate a resistance to patriarchal hegemony. Akiko’s body refuses to take in any food; this trope of eating disorder suggests Akiko’s refusal to accept her traditional role as a woman responsible for reproduction. Her eating disorder results in malnutrition, which also changes her menstruation cycles and makes it difficult for her to conceive. Her nonreproductivity leads to her husband’s contempt and disrespect because she fails to continue the family lineage. On the other hand, Akiko has been curious about her own sexual preference. After looking at pornography that she secretly purchases from the vending machine, she starts to fantasize about the models in the magazine. It is the first time she appreciates her own body and explores sexual pleasure by viewing other female bodies. Later on, because of frustration from work, Joichi vents his anger on his wife for her infertility. While drunk, he sexually abuses Akiko. After being raped and injured by her husband, Akiko faints and is sent to the hospital. At the hospital, Nurse Tomoko provides care and kindness to Akiko, who experiences a strong female

connection with her. After recovery, Akiko invites Tomoko over for a farewell dinner before she divorces her husband and leaves Japan. At dinner, Akiko kisses Tomoko, experiencing first physical contact with another woman. This is her actual homosexual initiation that she would not have realized otherwise but for the episode in *My American Wife!* about the lesbian couple.

Akiko's awareness of her sexuality starts with one episode of *My American Wife!* featuring Lara and Dyann, an interracial lesbian couple living in Northampton, Massachusetts. Akiko feels touched by the show about this lesbian couple, for she admires their bravery and determination to defend against the prejudices their family suffers. This is the crucial moment for Akiko to know about herself—her sexuality and desire. In Akiko's mind, "[s]he wanted a child; she'd never wanted John; once she became pregnant, she wouldn't need him ever again" (181). Traditionally, women are considered merely as a receptacle, a bearer for babies. However, for Akiko, her husband Joichi becomes simply an inseminator. Akiko makes up her mind that after Joichi impregnates her, she will no longer need him around her life. McWhorter points out:

Individuals are liberated when they are freed from whatever physical (and sometimes also mental or emotional) constraints have been imposed on them and therefore are able once again to dispose of their bodies and other property as they choose. One rebels in order to regain control of something over which one exercised control previously; one rebels in order to liberate oneself from current circumstances and reinstate an original condition of autonomy. (142)

As the idea of having her own baby grows stronger in her mind, Akiko feels energized and starts to feel hopeful in her life. The eating disorder gradually retreats from her body, and she becomes lively again. Later, Akiko faxes Jane about the discovery of her own sexuality after watching the show of Laura and Dyann. Akiko believes that there is a possibility to find happiness, and Jane could provide her with an answer. At this moment, these two women from two different geographical locations start a connection with each other.

My Year of Meats is a feminist text on many levels, for it presents Ozeki's critical point about female body and its autonomy. "Meats" are the author's sarcastic twist of the female body represented in the text. As "Meat is the message," the crew has to look for "meats"—the American wives that meet the standards. According to the specific guidelines of *My American Wife!*, a "qualified" American wife

must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home—the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America. (8)

These American housewives represent different "meats" to feed the eyes of the Japanese audience through the global corporate television industry. As mentioned earlier, because meat-eating is traditionally considered a "masculine diet," abused women in this context become a trope that suggests the vulnerable meat ready to be consumed by male violence. When Akiko is abused and raped by her husband, her

existence exemplifies a woman's vulnerable situation, like the meat served on the chopping board to be severed or on the dinner table ready to be cut and devoured. Carol Adams points out, "In the light of our current movements that focus on marital rape, pornography, and child sexual abuse, controlling male sexuality is a legitimate and essential aspect of any campaign to insure female wholeness" (156). This suggests that in a society where meat-eaters are the majority, women's position is figuratively associated with meats to be consumed in terms of male sexuality. In the novel, Akiko is regarded as a piece of meat, dehumanized and objectified as a body for reproduction, while her subjectivity never comes into existence. Upon her husband's demand, Akiko has to cook beef for every meal. This reaffirms Adams's vegetarian-feminist comment that "[e]ating animals acts as mirror and representation of patriarchal values. Meat eating is the re-inscription of male power at every meal" (Adams 187). As an advertising agent helping promote meat consumption, Joichi believes eating meat will revive his masculine virility and make Akiko pregnant. Joichi repeats the words in the cookbook to his wife, "A liberal meat supply...has always been associated with a happy and virile people and invariably has been the main food available to settlers of new and undeveloped territory" (20), which reinforces his patriarchal power that dominates women's sexuality and conquers their bodies as if they were the "new and undeveloped territory."

Similarly, Jane herself also serves as a piece of "meat" in the novel. She is, in her boyfriend Sloan's eyes, a perfect partner for sexual relationship with no strings attached. Jane describes Sloan's emotion as "enigma" (93). She can never figure out

what Sloan is thinking about because he is uninterested in any committed relationship. He can differentiate love from sex; women, for him, are just meats to stop the hunger for lust. In Jane's narrative, the abattoir reminds her of Sloan's apartment: "[A]ll polished surfaces, acute angles, hard glass, cold chrome; and leather. Like an abattoir, it could be hosed down without too much difficulty if anything unsightly, like an attachment or a sentiment, happened to splatter the walls" (220). Jane's situation in Sloan's apartment is similar to the meat in the abattoir ready to be dissected. Moreover, Sloan views Jane's body as a piece of land to be explored, trodden, and conquered. He sees his sexual relation with Jane as exciting adventures across the country, which also motivates him to have unprotected sex with Jane as one of his sexual adventures. In addition, Jane describes her first sexual experiences like "geographical surveys": "I was a continent, a landmass beset by small, brave pioneers. Like Gulliver" (90). Again, women's bodies are conceptualized as the "new and undeveloped territory." This trope further implies women's passivity and vulnerability for their bodies under the ravage of masculine power.

When Jane finds out that she is pregnant with Sloan's baby, this fact rekindles her desire for a baby. For Jane, who has given up hope of having a baby because of her barren body, such a miracle proves that her body is not a piece of useless land where no life would grow. The baby, a piece of "meat" inside her body, suddenly becomes so significant and precious that she wants to protect it at all costs. She recalls the American wives in the TV shows she has interviewed:

I had wanted a child so badly at one point in my life and that much desire is hard to erase. Maybe it was Dyann and Lara, and all their love and self-sufficient fertility. Or Grace Beaudroux and her ever-growing brood. Or Miss Helen Dawes and her softball team of her own, and enough love to nurture the hundreds who showed up on her doorstep. All my American Wives and their brimming, child-filled lives had awakened my desire all over again. (190)

Jane is envious of these American wives because they are happy as mothers with their children around. The thought of abortion that once came to her mind suddenly vanishes. Protecting this life inside her body becomes a mission for her. Jane is determined to keep her baby also due to the anecdote she encounters in a jail in Montana. When the Japanese crew arrives in Montana, they are misrecognized as “Mexican terrorists” and sent to jail, given that the local patrols cannot tell the difference between Mexicans and Japanese. One of her crew members, Oh, adopts a kitten born on his sweatshirt and then abandoned by its mother. Oh cradles this jail kitten and treats this little life with great care, “like a proud mom” (190). When Jane visits the tombs in Cemetery Hill where young children are buried, she realizes new-born life is so precious and vulnerable that it can disappear swiftly if not well taken care of. At that moment, everything becomes clear to Jane: “I wanted my baby” (193). Jane’s epiphany suggests that a baby is a kind of “meat” that deserves all due respect.

Another distinct feminist characteristic of the novel is Jane and Akiko’s mutual inspiration by the Japanese poet, Sei Shōnagon. Shōnagon’s words that appear in the

beginning of each chapter in the novel serve to translate the thoughts of the two protagonists. Shōnagon's words are full of wisdom and metaphors that either reflect the protagonists' behaviors or agree with their opinions. Living in feudal Japanese society during the eleventh century, Sei Shōnagon recorded her individual wisdom in the form of observations of humans and nature in her book *The Pillow Book*. Shōnagon was ambitious to overturn the traditions of Japanese society that emphasized a strict gender hierarchy between male and female. She wrote in bold Chinese characters, which only men used in her time, and she also dabbled in the male tongue (14). Regardless of the social doctrines of ancient Japan, Shōnagon followed her own rules and created her philosophy of life, which influenced later generations. Although Jane and Akiko have contrasting personalities and interests, what connects them is their mutual interest in reading Shōnagon. Akiko, who studied Shōnagon at college, also had a job after graduating. After marriage, she gives up her job, retreating into domestic life and shutting down all her desires before she even knows what they are. The only habit that Akiko maintains is her reading of Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book*. Akiko frequently associates Shōnagon's words with her life as a self-examination. Shōnagon's wisdom, deeply rooted inside Akiko, has progressively stored the subversive energy that ultimately helps defend herself against Joichi's violence. From a housewife with low self-esteem to a determined woman fighting against domestic violence, Akiko has gone through a metamorphosis, thanks to Shōnagon's wisdom and Jane's encouragement. In the end, Akiko is transformed "from a weak, 'barren' 'girl' to a more independent, pregnant woman" (Chu 118).

Likewise, inspired by Shōnagon, Jane resolves to become a documentary filmmaker recording what she considers truths. Although working for *My American Wife!* is not her preference, Jane eventually uses this job to find out the truth about agribusiness in the United States. Identifying herself with Shōnagon, Jane expects, “[S]ome girl would watch my shows in Japan, now or maybe even a thousand years from now, and be inspired and learn something real about America” (15). Jane hopes to tell her audience of the truths in her work, as she says:

I had spent so many years, in both Japan and America, floundering in a miasma of misinformation about culture and race, I was determined to use this window into mainstream network television to *educate*. Perhaps it was naïve, but I believed, honestly, that I could use wives to sell meat in the service of a Larger Truth. (27)

Jane presents truths through her visual narrative in her independently produced documentary, which aims to convince the audience with her sincerity in subverting the truths that the public media would not present. In her self-reflexive narrative, Jane writes:

...I realized that truth was like race and could be measured only in ever-diminishing approximations. Still, as a documentarian, you must strive for the truth and believe in it wholeheartedly.

Halved as I am, I was born doubled. By the time I wrote the pitch for *My American Wife!* my talent for speaking out of both sides of my mouth was already honed. On one hand I really did believe that you

could use wives to sell meat in the service of a greater Truth. On the other hand, I was broke after my divorce and desperate for a job. (176)

While shooting *My American Wife!*, Jane discovers that in the feedlot, DES is still being used to enhance the growth of meat in cows. For Jane, the greater truth lies in “Meat is the message,” implying this dark secret of agribusiness in America that Jane attempts to show the audience. The “message in meats” is an alert conveying the information about consumers’ general ignorance about agribusiness. Ironically, while consumers are eating meats, they are actually vulnerable like “meats” to be consumed by the capitalist power of meat market corporate, such as BEEF-EX in the novel, which only cares about profit-making and disregards the health and potential bodily damage of consumers. The truths in Jane’s narrative appeal to readers emotionally and logically. For example, the American wives, Lara and Dyann, become vegetarian by choice because in their research on meat-processing in America, they find out that the illegal use of hormone and chemical in feedlots has caused great damage on human bodies. Dyann’s researched article “Beef Junkies” reveals the truths of meat processing in America. In the article, she comments that the use of estrus-synchronizing compound called Lutalyse, a hormone that stimulates the bull into heat, is the “modern love—efficient, assembly-line artificial insemination and controlled calving” (206). This hormonal chemical also affects the human body’s natural functions, including respiration, digestion, nerve response, and reproduction. It can also stimulate menstruation and abort fetuses in the second trimester of pregnancy (206). In this aspect, artificial

chemicals have taken the place of the body's natural functions. The body has lost its autonomy and becomes subjected to artificial chemical regulations.

After reading Dyann's article about the horror of agribusiness, Jane finds it imperative to know more about the truth of meat-processing. Jane thinks, "If the feedlot is anything like the ones I've been reading about, there should be plenty of opportunity to shoot some pretty horrifying material. And the slaughterhouse—I have high hopes for that" (210). Jane has an agenda in her mind that she needs to find the materials that she can adopt in her documentary project. At the risk of being dismissed by the company because she violates the policies of *My American Wife!*, Jane is conscientious in telling the truth. She writes, "I need this job. I can't afford to get fired now. On the other hand, I can't continue making the kind of program Ueno wants, either" (210). Jane's ethical concern about what is life-and-death truth and what is the false truth presented in show business starts to draw the line. The concern about human life becomes so strong that she finally decides, "I had to tell some truths about meats, even if it meant getting fired" (232).

The episode of John and Bunny Dunn is the highlight of the feedlot controversy Jane wishes to uncover. The story of the Dunns validates Dyann's research about the use of illegal drug in feedlots. In John Dunn's ranch in Fossil, Texas, Jane accidentally discovers that John Dunn's son, Gale, still uses Lutalyse to abort the cattle. As Jane gradually enters the meat-processing fields—the feedlots and the abattoirs—she also directs readers into grotesque, gory, horrifying butchering scenes. Moreover, Jane discovers the secret of the Dunns: their five-year-old daughter Rosie has estrogen

poisoning from the growth enhancing substance that Gale uses in the feedlot. When Rosie eats the popsicle Gale gives her in the feedlot and licks the melted juice on her dusted hands, she also ingests Lutalyse into her body. The side-effect of Lutalyse causes Rosie's "premature thelarche," or precocious puberty, with premature growth of breasts and pubic hair. This illegal drug not only damages Rosie's body but also changes Gale's voice. Rosie and Gale are the results of real-life human body experimentation with artificial hormones. Encouraged by Jane's dedication to telling the truth, Bunny Dunn eventually stops denying Rosie's unusual growth and decides to face the camera and talk about Rosie's deformed body. Bunny understands that Lutalyse damaged her daughter's body and hopes that her interview would inform people of estrogen poisoning.

While editing her documentary, those memories of gory slaughtering scenes and penetrating screams of animals in the abattoir resurface in Jane's mind. The editing procedure resembles trauma victims' repeated traumatic memories that haunt their lives. Jane describes her hysterical emotions: "I do it again. And again. Twisting the dial, shuttling the tape backward and forward, running my finger across the cusp of life and death, over and over, like there's a trick here, something that if I practice I might get good at. Sucking life back into a body. Sometimes when I think about it I cry" (325-26). All these memories also remind her of the accident in the slaughterhouse. While the crew was close-shooting the slaughtering scenes, the blood suddenly gushed out of the cow's body toward the crew. The crew was panicked by this unexpected incident. While trying to protect the camera, Jane tripped into the puddle of cow's blood and

fainted. After that, the crew sent her to the hospital, the doctor found out Jane's miscarriage, which has happened before this accident. However, Jane believes that it is her carelessness that causes the miscarriage. This excruciating memory comes to haunt her again. During her editing, she has had numerous nightmares about the faces of frightened cows and blood flowing like a river. The repetitive act of editing, as Jane says, "would redeem my insufficiency, my lapses, my sorrow. But the sorrow is too severe, and the guilt too intransigent" (326). To a certain extent, Jane's resolution to complete the documentary is her confession of her reluctance to "sell the meats" for the TV show and an apology for her lost baby. Jane can rewind and fast forward the tapes, but she can never turn death back to life. Even though she loses her baby, Jane has been incubating the ideas for her documentary. Jane knows that as a survivor of traumatic experience—the miscarriage, the witness of America's meat processing industry, and the use of illegal drug on the cattle that also affects human beings, she must tell the truth, not only about herself but also about the others who suffer from this trauma of environmental damage.

Another way in which *My Year of Meats* is a feminist novel is Ozeki's depiction of the male characters as villains. Ozeki conceptualizes the female characters' victimization through domestic abuse and chemical poisoning. In the novel, Joichi Ueno is a typical villain as well as a dogmatic patriarch who seeks to dominate everything to secure his masculine power. He is a sexual predator, treating women like meat, desiring the female strippers at the night club, and attempting to take advantage of Jane. Ironically, while he accuses Akiko of being "a cold, dead fish, not interested in sex"

(195) and “unsavory” like a piece of tasteless meat (241), he is actually impotent. Besides, knowing that Jane is going to be the director of the show, he insists on flying to America to supervise the show. He emphasizes the idea of “authentic America” in the show. Whenever Jane has different ideas about the show, Joichi always vetoes them. For instance, when Jane decides to interview the lesbian couple, the black family, and the family that adopts a Korean child, Joichi comments, “*My American Wife* is for Japanese people, not for Koreans or black peoples” (119). In addition, when Akiko suggests that they adopt children like the Beaudroux family from Louisiana, Joichi yells at her angrily, “I want *my own children*. Mine. Do you hear? *Mine!* Not some bastard of a Korean whore and an idiot American soldier. I want my genes in *my child*. That’s the point! *Mine!*” (100). Joichi believes in only one version of authenticity of a lineage and a culture. When he directs *My American Wife!*, all he wants is the “authenticity” of American culture. He insists on beef as the one and only focus of the show, while other meats, like pork or lamb, are secondary and inappropriate for the show. When Joichi finds out that Akiko prepares beef imported from Australia, he comments, “Australia is a land of criminals and traitors” (143). In his understanding, there is no hybridity and diversity; his understanding of “authenticity” is based upon (stereo)types, and his version of “America” is completely different from Jane’s.

Jane’s view of American culture is heterogeneous. During her shooting for *My American Wife!*, Jane attempts to include a variety of characters to represent American wives. She introduces the Mexican family, the Beaudroux family with adopted children of different races, the Bukowskys with a disable family member, and the lesbian

interracial couple Lara and Dyann, who are also vegetarian, all of whom represent America's diversity. For Jane, each family has its own unique qualities; these families are American, but they are also different from one another. Jane tries to follow Joichi's slogan, "Pork is possible, Beef is best." However, after seeing Christina Bukowsky recover from her physical trauma and ask for lamb chops, Jane comments: "Screw the Beef. Lamb was Lovable" (140). All kinds of "meats" should deserve equal attention and appreciation. Later on, Jane's decision to show the lesbian couple completely subverts Joichi's intention to promote "American beef." First, this lesbian couple does not follow the heteronormative standards, and second, they refuse to eat meats after knowing about meat-processing in America. Every step Jane takes in the show is further away from Joichi's expectation but fulfills her ideal of the diversity of America.

Gale Dunn is another villain in the novel. Jane associates Gale with Joichi Ueno by their handshake—"Cold. Damp. Suspicious" (254). Gale never appeals to readers as a positive character throughout the story. Jane describes, "His body language was all about openness, a casual cowboy-nailed-to-the-cross sort of posture, but his eyes were wary" (258). When crew member Suzuki shows Jane the clip of the interview with the Dunns, Jane surprisingly catches the scene where Gale fondles his half-sister Rosie. Gale's villainy contributes not only to his ignorance about the negative effects of illegal drug use but also to his threat to Jane, trying to deny his illegal conduct. On the other hand, he is also a victim of the whole manipulative meat production because of his rising voice, influenced by the growth enhancing substance. This rising voice seems like

a penalty that emasculates Gale—a loss of male virility, which parallels Joichi’s impotence.

Despite the “impotence” and the negative portrayal of male characters in the novel, not all the male characters are villains. For instance, the crew members, Suzuki and Oh, are important to Jane’s accomplishment in her documentary. It is Suzuki whose interest encourages Jane to adopt the lesbian couple in the show. Suzuki tells Jane, “If I was serious about wanting to use *My American Wife!* as a platform to further international understanding...then why not do a show about alternative lifestyles, something that was not often tolerated in Japan” (173). Both Suzuki and Jane agree upon the idea of diversity in America. Besides, when Jane falls into the cow’s blood in the slaughterhouse, it is Suzuki and Oh who help rescue the tapes that contain Bunny Dunn’s interview footage. In addition, Dave Schultz, a truck driver from Hanford, Colorado, and also an independent researcher, represents a positive male figure aware of environmental issues. He voluntarily escorts the crew to local feedlots. In his conversation with Jane, Schultz explains the desertification of the United States: “one-third of its topsoil since colonial times—so much damage in such a short history” (248). The desertification demonstrates the loss of soil, which is supposed to nurture plants on the surface of the earth. While the soil is gradually disappearing from the surface of the planet, plants will also lose their ground support. This change of environment implies the potential infertility of the land due to a lack of concern about the overdevelopment on topsoil. The infertility also reflects the nonreproductivity of the female characters in

the novel—the sterility of motherland, as well as the male impotence mentioned previously.

As an important characteristic of transnational/global feminism, *My Year of Meats* crosses spatial boundaries and includes experiences of women from Japan and different regions around America. Even though women characters in the novel live in different places, there is no difference in their experiences of domestic violence, corporate manipulation, or physical damage by environmental poisoning. It is indeed author Ozeki's strong intention to focus her global concern on male violence to women. However, the ending of the novel seems to romanticize America and reinforce a strong American-centric ideology. Undeniably, the novel presents Jane's global awareness of women's situations outside America when she offers help to Akiko, as Jane remarks, "While I'd been worried about the well-being of the American women I filmed as subjects, suddenly here was the audience, embodied in Akiko, with a name and a vulnerable identity" (231). Jane suddenly realizes that her responsibility is not just limited to America; she has to reach out and cross the geographical boundary to provide assistance to those in need. At the end of the novel, Akiko finally escapes from her abusive husband and arrives in America. Having been living in a male-dominated culture, Akiko yearns for the individuality and liberty promised by the media presentation of American dream, believing that America is where she can find happiness. She even wants her unborn baby girl to be an American citizen. If the mission of global feminism is to extend its concerns to women in other countries and develop a transnational perspective and female alliance around the world, the centripetal

view of America in the novel fails. One of the important goals in globalization is to decenter the longstanding hegemony of western standards that dominates the world and to breach the boundaries between different nation-states. Dissatisfied with the ending's perpetual romanticization of "American Dream" and negligence of transnational feminism's mission in the new era, Monica Chu comments:

The text's irony lies between rejecting Joichi's ridiculous allusions to a so-called American dream and accepting Jane's multicultural, nonhegemonic re-vision, invested with an American-style romance with difference, of which the nation's primary acceptance has arisen through ethnic food. Such a flattening and homogenizing of difference veers little from Joichi's approach. Thus, Jane can be accused, like Joichi, of cleansing her images. If Ozeki's novel delivers a globalization of difference, its underlying overculture, or ur-text, reiterates nothing less than a postnational (or a white American) agenda. (108)

If Ozeki attempts to present her concern of global feminism in *My Year of Meats*, the novel that ends with "America as a utopia" deconstructs that agenda. The ending falls into the banal postnationalist hegemony that reinforces the big "American Dream" to the global audience.

This Place Called Absence

The narrative structure of *This Place Called Absence* revolves around the psychological trauma of narrators. In the novel, all four narrators tell their stories in a

first-person voice and reveal their inner secrets and personal thoughts through the recollection of their fragmented memories. The author Kwa attempts to cross different boundaries on many levels: the geographical boundary between Singapore and Canada, the family boundary between parents and children, the psychosomatic boundary between the mind and the body, the temporal boundary between the turn of the century and the contemporary, the cultural boundary between the traditional and the modern, and most importantly, the spiritual boundary between the living and the dead. By breaking boundaries, Kwa aims to eliminate the “absence” between two realities and ideologies, and asserts human experiences commonly shared by the female characters in the novel.

The primary narrator Wu Lan is traumatized by the unknown reason for her father Yen’s “wordless, private suicide” (18) with two bottles of sleeping pills. For Wu Lan, his death is “invisible, as indecipherable as a shadow glimpsed around the corner” (6). Wu Lan’s lack of (or suppression of) feelings for her father’s death demonstrates a complex emotional rigidity toward him. After the funeral, it is astonishing to Wu Lan that her father’s death incapacitates her from continuing her work as a psychologist in the clinic. She describes her nervous breakdown: “I feel as if I’ve walked up to the edge of a cliff, in a slow, deliberate trance, the pebbles crunching softly underneath my shoes. Look down into that total and infinite absence, the abyss, unable to turn back, unable to jump” (7). Because of her depression, she takes a leave of absence for a year, trying to recover from the pain of the loss of her father. Wu Lan starts her life searching and healing over this melancholia from the loss. In her narration, Wu Lan seems distant

from her father emotionally, as she says, “Fathers keeps dying in my imagination” (6). However, the depiction of the father-daughter relationship is pervasive in Wu Lan’s narrative. Wu Lan behaves calmly and withholds grief in front of the mourners at the funeral, while her brother Michael cries on his wife’s shoulder. In Wu Lan’s eyes, Michael is lucky because at least he can feel the grief; her own feelings for life and death, by contrast, seem to have frozen.

More than once Wu Lan feels a deep sense of guilt for her father’s death. The guilt is ascribed to her internalized feelings and silence about the loss. At the funeral, Wu Lan describes her sense of guilt: “When I saw him in his coffin, his closed eyes, his lifeless body accused me. But I’ve told no one. Not even Mahmee or Michael” (17). When Mahmee calls her, Wu Lan, again, feels “guilty, caught in the act, as if Mahmee might have sensed I just had been punishing myself with numerous recollections of the past” (19). Wu Lan and her mother deal with the loss differently. Whereas Mahmee eases the pain by talking about the past, Wu Lan avoids talking about her feelings, for which she writes, “Ironically, for someone who works in this trade [psychology], a crucible for confession of secrets and illusions, I don’t find it easy to talk about my deepest experiences. The more painful or profound an experience, the less I’m able to speak of it” (19). Wu Lan is haunted by her father’s phone call 48 hours before he kills himself. He leaves the message on the answering machine while Wu Lan is busy at work. His message is simply: “Wu Lan...it’s Father...I want to talk to you” (17). Such a short message keeps Wu Lan wondering whether she could have made a difference if she answered the phone at that moment. She has been a psychologist listening to her

clients' powerlessness, so she has become used to being a listener and learned to set aside her own emotions in order to do her job responsibly. However, Wu Lan finds herself weak in dealing with her own father's mental issue. It suddenly dawns on her how strong an impact her father's phone call before death has imposed upon her. She says, "He expected me to listen whenever he turned on the sadness late at night. How selfish of him to leave that message on my answering machine! Don't he think about the impact it might have on me later? Later and too late" (99). Regarding her father's "irresponsible" message, Wu Lan has changed her emotions from guilty to accusatory, for she has felt the power of mental torment taking effect on her body.

Although the novel presents the emptiness and loss that Wu Lan suffers from the trauma of her father's death and her ignorance about his suicide, it also depicts Wu Lan's commemoration of her father and her dedication to filling the void between herself and her father. In recollecting her memories, Wu Lan realizes a strong connection with her father that she has been deliberately denying. Through her narrative, Wu Lan reinitiates the missing link with her father, by which readers also know about her father—his passion, his religion, his regret, and his depression. For example, after returning to Vancouver from the funeral, Wu Lan starts to think about her father's habits and imagines what it would be like if he lived in Canada: "Father would have liked this Remembrance Day ceremony, had he made it to this country. He would have risen early, put on too many warm clothes, drunk a cup of scalding hot Ceylon tea, thickened with condensed milk..." (4). Wu Lan knows not only about the details of her father's habits but also his secrets. Her father is a devoted Christian, but

he has to hide his religious faith in front of his atheist father. Thus, he secretly collects booklets and materials like *Daily Bread* or *Reader's Digest*, for fear of being found out by his father. Wu Lan and her brother Michael call it his “mad collection” (4). These details illustrate Wu Lan’s discerning observation of her father’s life.

Wu Lan’s father has been depressed for a long time. His mental depression results from his deceased mother, Grandmother Neo, who struggled with a life of poverty and died of cervical cancer in her early thirties when he was still very young. Wu Lan’s father has been on antidepressant medication due to this haunting melancholia over his mother’s suffering and death. Wu Lan remembers that her father would talk about his mother “with the soft hysteria of a child who had permanently lost his way” (18). He also cried to his wife about the death of his mother routinely (162). Yen’s oedipal fixation on his mother causes his depression and melancholia. Wu Lan assumes that her father commits suicide because he can no longer deal with the traumatic experiences of seeing his mother suffer from the pain of cancer, while there is nothing he can do to stop it. It is a self-inflicted guilt that haunts his life.

Likewise, tormented by the guilt that hovers over her life, Wu Lan internalizes her trauma as a way of finding a refuge. However, this trauma magnifies inside her, like a tangling knot in her mind. Although a psychologist herself, Wu Lan still needs another professional to help her untangle this traumatic knot. At the Chinese clinic, the herbalist Dr. Hom tells her, “Your shen, your spirit is trapped and needs to be freed” (117). When she first feels the existence of her father’s spirit around her, Wu Lan realizes that trauma lodged inside her body is haunting her, as she writes, “Father’s vitality was trapped

inside him. He could feel a loss, but didn't know what to do about it" (118). Wu Lan compares herself with the egg in the refrigerator with "its awful vulnerability" (147). The egg, frozen and fragile, represents the primordial state of a life that has become cold and breakable. The imagery of "egg in the refrigerator" recurs when Wu Lan describes how ordinary objects like eggs can be compared to human behaviors. She thinks, "The egg in the refrigerator. It lies in the dark, uneventful in its ordinariness. Like the pills in my cabinet, the knives in the kitchen. Everything desperately ordinary, until a person decides to invest such objects with a life-or-death significance" (177). Wu Lan's realization reflects that human beings hold "[t]he capacity to feel, to suffer. To be broken by pain or tragedy. Or the capacity to transcend suffering somehow" (164). Her epiphany shows the importance of releasing the trauma that haunts her soul. The traumatic knot in her mind has to be untied by the one who ties it—she is the one who ties the knot and also the only one who can untie it.

Another narrator, Wu Lan's mother Mahmee, depicts her past life with her own family of origin and her husband in Singapore. Mahmee's narration also reveals a wife's inner voice about her relation with her deceased husband and a mother's concern about a missing connection with her daughter. Mahmee is dealing with two losses in her life. One is the death of her husband Yen, and the other, the estrangement of her daughter. Mahmee feels ashamed of Yen's unnatural death, so she lies to people that he is on a business trip. She recalls past memories as a way to alleviate the torment of this trauma. Her monologues appear fragmented as if she were murmuring about trivialities of life by the flow of her stream of consciousness. In fact, her memory reveals personal

grievance with her life. For example, her sexist mother spoils her brother and ignores her. However, when her mother is ill, she is the one taking care of her, while her brother becomes a gambler, losing all his money. Meanwhile, Mahmee has been living in an unhappy marriage. She describes Yen as a bad-tempered person. Although Wu Lan has a secretive personality like her father, Mahmee writes, “Lucky she not a drinker” (20). This suggests that Yen was not only depressive but also an alcoholic. There is no further revelation of domestic violence in the text, but Mahmee’s story insinuates the trauma of living in the shadow of a husband with a psychological disability. Even after his death, Yen’s spirit still does not relieve Mahmee from this mental torment.

The other loss for Mahmee is Wu Lan’s estrangement. Because she was neglected by her own mother, Mahmee wishes to develop a good mother-daughter relationship with Wu Lan. However, there is a disconnection between them. After she immigrated to Canada, Wu Lan sent a confession letter back home to inform her family of her homosexuality. After that, a tension arose between Wu Lan and her family. Mahmee attempts to communicate with her daughter, but Wu Lan is reluctant to speak her mind. Mahmee describes Wu Lan’s silence: “When my daughter speak, she say so little, as if she stand very far away from me, but her shouting reach me only as softly as the pillows I sleep on every night” (20). Mahmee has been upset about Wu Lan’s homosexuality. She writes, “My Lan-Lan doing strange things without man in her life. Don’t understand” (34). Mahmee’s and Wu Lan’s narratives alternate to demonstrate the views of a mother and a daughter, but there is no real communication between the two. Mahmee claims that she does not understand why Wu Lan leaves Singapore, but

Wu Lan chooses to escape from home in order to find freedom for her homosexuality. Despite her frustration with Wu Lan's homosexuality, Mahmee is excited about the pregnancy of Michael's wife, as opposed to Wu Lan, whose homosexuality means nonreproductivity: "childless, and uninterested in breeding" (80). Wu Lan's nonreproductivity is further analogous of her leave of absence—idle, inactive, not working. Wu Lan comments on her own homosexuality as "the absence that goes with such a choice"—the choice of having no children (80). For Mahmee, a lack of understanding about homosexuality separates her from her daughter. Homosexuality is not only a social taboo but also an absence that people avoid talking about. This absence is constructed by the heteronormative standards that emphasize family values with a heterosexual, monogamous domestic partner and children. For sexual minorities who fail to conform to this value, the feeling of absence becomes a trauma in their lives that keeps reminding them of their "incompleteness" and "absence" in society.

In the other storyline, the trauma of Lee Ah Choi and Chow Chat Mui is multidimensional. The privations of Ah Choi's hometown in China force her family to abandon her. In a traditionally sexist culture where people value boys over girls, girls are treated like commodities for trade. Ah Choi is sold for the price of three sacks of rice. Different from Ah Choi's situation, Chat Mui escapes from home by her own choice. She was brought up in an abusive family in China. In her memories of home, her father is "an angry man who came home late at night after drinking at the inn. Laughing one moment, swearing and hitting my mother the next" (12). Chat Mui describes her life like an animal caught up in a snarl: "I grew tired of living like a

captured animal. I was a chicken in a wire cage, slaughtered nightly without bloodshed. At least chickens only die once” (12). Additionally, she cannot find a man to marry because she is too tall. Her “anomalous” physical characteristic becomes the reason for men to decline the marriage. Her strong personality drives her to escape from home with her cousin Ah Loong to Nanyang (Singapore). Chat Mui looks forward to a bright life in Singapore. Unfortunately, the life outside her father’s cage is much more horrific.

The most traumatizing reality for Ah Choi and Chat Mui is their lives as “ah kus,” or prostitutes. They have to grapple with this cruel, abusive reality and a life of disrespect and derision by people on the streets. Other than the fact that they are separated from their families at a young age, they also suffer from the brutality of making a living with their bodies. Moreover, living in a small world where women struggle for a living, the prostitutes have to fight with each other to win the patronage of their clients. The prostitutes lose the autonomy of their bodies, which serve only to satisfy the lust and desire of their clients. Although being an ah ku is a notorious profession, Chat Mui can somehow look beyond people’s stereotypes of a prostitute. She thinks:

An ah ku is powerful in ways that a wife never could be. I learned the various positions of sex acts, that there are many ways for a woman and a man to lie together. Not the routine ways my father touched me, while I lay still, doing nothing. The more I learned, the more hopeful I became. I had acquired the powers that would guarantee my freedom. In a world

where men's hungers are never sufficiently satiated by their well-mannered wives. (36)

Chat Mui redefines the identity of a prostitute as a rebellious subject. She holds sex as a strong power against traditional heterosexual relationships in which wives are obligated to have sex with their husbands just for procreation, losing the opportunity to explore sexual pleasure and sensuality of their own bodies. Chat Mui's perception of her sexuality reflects that "[s]exuality is a means of self-discovery; this is sexuality that is excessive to heterosexuality: autoeroticism and lesbianism" (Bell 88). Given her identity as a lesbian, Chat Mui is well aware that a lesbian body is not defined by heteronormative laws. Instead, a lesbian body has the autonomy that allows explorations of sexuality beyond reproduction. Besides, Chat Mui trades her body for a life of freedom from her father's sexual abuse. She knows that if she does not take any action to change her life, "[t]he actions might still be the same now, opening my body for others' desires, but something important has changed. This prison is no longer my father's. My name and my worthy attributes carved into my wooden frame of our common window" (55).²³ Living in a life of no choices, Chat Mui would rather become a prostitute and enjoy freedom.

Shannon Bell argues that a prostitute's body is defined by layers of dichotomization. First of all, human beings are divided into men and women based on anatomical facts. Under the category of "women," there are more dichotomies, such as

²³ As a tradition in the brothel, the names and attributes of prostitutes are carved on the wooden frame of the window as an advertisement to solicit clients. Ah Sek, the brothel owner's son, followed a

“good girl/bad girl, madonna/whore, normal/abnormal, licit/illicit, wife/prostitute, as well as the high and low images that have fragmented and categorize the female body” (Bell 40). This either-or categorization has limited the possibilities of a woman’s body and forced women to choose either identity. They are either part of the norms or the *other*, the social outcast. Furthermore, Bell contends:

The modern discourses on prostitution was part of a broader discursive production of female sexuality which separated the female body into the reproductive body and the un(re)productive body: normal female sexuality was defined in terms of woman’s reproductive functions; deviant female sexuality was defined in terms of prostitution. Reproductive sexuality, which denied woman active sexual desire and pleasure, was the respectable norm; prostitution was its inversion. And it was the mapping of prostitution which made possible the delimitation of this respectable norm. (Bell 41)

As prostitutes and lesbians, Chat Mui and Ah Choi are marginal subjects and women of nonreproductivity with a loose sexual life in the standard of heteronormative dualism. Chat Mui is aware of the absence of a homosexual voice, and her story with Ah Choi will become obscured and buried in history. As she recalls the stories about bravery in war and in love that her mother told her, she wonders, “If I were a storyteller, would I dare tell about my love for Ah Choi? What kinds of words could I use?” (54). Moreover, she questions, “How to speak the unspeakable? This desire for her. Without

fortuneteller’s instructions and hired a craftsman to carve Chat Mui’s name on the wooden frame for

language to name it, it is no fixed like the window frame. Free like the wind, not a willow rooted to the ground, dependent on earth for its fate. This is my secret and my power” (55-56). Against all the odds, her secret love for Ah Choi gives her strength to continue her life.

Sold by her family to become an ah ku, Ah Choi has always been trying to find a way to live outside of the life of a prostitute by any possible means. She has been secretly hiding the extra tips her clients give her, hoping that one day she can escape from the brothel and have a life of her own with Chat Mui. However, Ah Choi also expects that once she finds some rich client willing to marry her, she can convert her identity from an ah ku into a housewife with dignity and respectability. She thinks, “I hope a man will take me away from this dirt-ridden labour someday. Either a man who adores me, or a man who makes me pregnant and will maintain his honour to me and his child” (77). Ah Choi believes a prostitute’s body can be purified once she clears her past and follows social norms—getting married, having children, becoming a dutiful housewife. Despite a few successful examples where prostitutes marry their clients, Chat Mui deflates Ah Choi for her naïveté, knowing that very few men would marry a prostitute for a wife. Chat Mui also wonders if the children would feel ashamed of their mother’s past as a prostitute, as she thinks, “Impure blood. Shame visited on their heads because of their parents’ foolishness” (43). While laughing at Ah Choi’s foolishness, Chat Mui herself also dreams about escaping with Ah Choi and starting a new life together, instead of a private rendezvous as they have managed to do to meet each

better business.

other. However, Ah Choi understands, “This love between us is worthless in the eyes of the world. Too melodramatic, she and her stories. My dream is more possible than hers” (96). On the other hand, Chat Mui is anxious about Ah Choi’s optimism of being “rescued” by men, which not only disrespects their love but also suggests that they will lose each other if this dream comes true.

In addition to their job of serving their clients with their bodies, prostitutes also suffer from sexually transmitted diseases that ravage their bodies. In order to spare from the physical pain STDs cause, they smoke opium. However, addiction to opium only deteriorates their bodies severely and causes their deaths eventually. Without proper medical treatments, their physical conditions decline, which pushes their dreams of escape further away. Opium serves not only as pain-killer but also a hallucinogen that relieves Ah Choi and Chat Mui temporarily from their miserable lives. Opium can relieve the physical pain and create fantasy and illusion, but it can also kill. In the end, Ah Choi takes opium to kill herself after Sum Tok discovers the money she has been hiding secretly.²⁴ Before she dies, Ah Choi swears that she will come back as a ghost to haunt the brothel for revenge.

Ghost-haunting is an important leitmotif in the novel. It is a metaphor that suggests the trauma-haunted psyche and internalized depression of an individual. In traditional belief, ghosts come back to haunt the living for a reason. I posit that ghosts serve as a trope, suggesting the psychological burden of Mahmee and Wu Lan, who cannot relieve their discontent and resentment to their families. In order to relieve this

burden and find happiness for their lives, they need self-exorcism to relieve their trauma, the “ghost” inside them. Both Mahmee and Wu Lan experience Yen’s ghost haunting them. Throughout the novel, Wu Lan has tried to figure out why her father’s spirit never stops haunting her. Wu Lan describes her encounter with her father’s ghost: “What does Father want to tell me? What he didn’t get to say before he died? I feel some kind of urgency has infected me as never before, and I keep thinking of eggs, of blood, of the water in our bodies, and the fragility of boundaries” (57). Wu Lan concentrates on these tangible or fragile materials as opposed to her father’s unintelligible spiritual existence. As a scientist of human psychology, Wu Lan needs concrete facts to interpret. However, she resists crossing the boundary to locate the ghost inside her. At last, both Mahmee and Wu Lan resort to traditional exorcising ceremonies to relieve the ghost inside them.

In the meantime, Wu Lan is simultaneously engaged with her personal research in Canada about prostitutes of Singapore during her leave of absence. Symbolically, Wu Lan’s connection with her father’s ghost parallels her research of the “ghosts” of the prostitutes, whose stories are unknown to people. In her research, Wu Lan reviews the immigration history of the South China Sea from the 1880s to the early twentieth century. While reading a book about prostitutes in turn-of-the-century Singapore, Wu Lan discovers a table of names of the prostitutes who committed suicide; followed by the heading of “Suicide Due to” are the causes of their death: “*Overdose of opium. Asphyxia from drowning. Jumped from second floor window. Lysol poisoning*” (47).

²⁴ “Sum Tok” is the nickname of the brothel owner Chan’s wife. She is the “den-mother” and nobody

The death verdict of these prostitutes seems to simplify the causes of their deaths. The language lacks any substantial personal narrative about each individual's life, on which Wu Lan comments, "Nothing much has changed, these means of eliminating oneself....The true causes buried beneath the means, hidden from outsiders' eyes" (47). For Wu Lan, few people know about the history of these prostitutes because "[t]hey weren't rich or politically powerful so most history books tend to ignore them" (163). Such a comment on historical documents makes Wu Lan believe each suicide must have a story behind it. Therefore, Wu Lan is determined to understand the reason of her father's suicide and the wandering of his ghost.

The novel strategically connects the characters Wu Lan and Chat Mui in terms of their unusual height for Asian women and their homosexuality. Homosexuality has been a social taboo that counters mainstream heteronormative standards. Chat Mui shares her love with Ah Choi secretively. Even though they sell their bodies to clients, Ah Choi and Chat Mui are aware of the strong sexual and emotional dynamic between them. At the first sight of Chat Mui, Ah Choi describes the unusual, sensual ecstasy for her: "I enjoy watching her. A private pleasure" (11). This female connection is socially forbidden yet sexually exciting, as Ah Choi realizes, "No one pays us for this pleasure" (48). The private gaze fulfills their desire and pleasure that nobody can deprive them of. This private gaze also reflects on Wu Lan, who looks at the portraits of the ah kus in the book. She describes:

knows her real name. To her face the ah kus call her "Kwai po."

[O]ne of the ah ku displays an eternally defiant look, as if she were at any moment going to strut out of range of the camera's gaze and race off to some wild party...The other ah ku, on the contrary, looks vacant, staring as if not knowing what or whom she's staring at, her head tilted slightly forward, chin down, the life submissively absent from her eyes.

(46)

Wu Lan's gaze at the portraits of the ah kus demonstrates not only female desire that transcends the barriers of time and space but also the felt empathy that the female body deserves its sexual pleasure more than just for the purpose of reproduction. Wu Lan identifies with the ah kus in terms of their homosexuality forgotten in time and history, as she narrates, "How do I know anything about anyone else's life? We're all strangers. And yet I've felt compelled to imagine them, Ah Choi and Chat Mui, together. I don't even know for sure if lesbianism existed among the ah ku of that time" (163). The story of Ah Choi and Chat Mui thus inspires Wu Lan to discover those politically powerless figures in history.

In addition, both Chat Mui and Wu Lan are initiated by the scholars in the temple who inform them of the meanings of words. The words seem like magical medicine dispelling trauma that haunts them. In order to relieve the depression caused by her father's death, Wu Lan decides to go to the temple to look for spiritual peace. In the temple, an androgynous-looking woman named Tze Cheng helps interpret Wu Lan's name. Wu Lan remembers that her Mah-Mah (grandmother on her maternal side) named her "Wu Lan" because she expects Wu Lan to become a person who possesses

the capability of helping others. However, as Wu Lan learns more about her name in Tze Cheng's interpretation, "wu" can refer to "wu shi," or "shaman," whose job is to cast away evil spirits and help people recover from illness caused by haunting ghosts or diseases. Knowing that her name "wu," if pronounced in different intonations, can have different meanings, Wu Lan starts to discover the possibilities of her identity. She thinks:

The silence in which the word falls, the echo of meaning resounding somewhere in space. Music matters. The falling of rocks into the abyss. How would my life have changed if my name was sounded differently, if the tone of it could draw on a different realm in the universe for significance? If only I could ingest my own name the way I consume food, swallow its various possibilities, assimilate their meanings into my blood. (123-24)

Furthermore, Wu Lan thinks about her escape from Singapore twenty years ago as a self-exile, hoping to find freedom and peace from her traumatized family as a therapy for herself, but at the same time she senses the loss of her self while family trauma still lingers inside her. She writes:

Proud of my escape from Singapore, I convinced myself that leaving the country was the solution—a flight into exile which resulted in internal fissures in the psyche, the cleaving of memory from memory. Here I've been in this country two decades, with the unsaid and the unsayable still swirling inside of me. Once I had been Lan-Lan [Wu Lan's nickname],

my mother's precious orchid. Lan-Lan stayed close to home, homing in on her parents' needs. But who is Wu Lan? (123)

Wu Lan's self-reflexive thoughts about her name inspire her with the idea that an individual's name can have a tremendous variety of significatory possibilities. Names, like words, have multiple meanings; people carry different names to represent different identities and play different personas. An individual does not have *one and only* way to live. To expel the trauma inside, Wu Lan realizes that while other people help her understand her self, she must converse with herself. In the end, Wu Lan follows the traditional method and starts a ritual of exorcism as a closure to her father's spirit:

I am Wu Lan, an exorcist of hidden demons.

I am the discoverer of secrets.

I stir fire into the bones of the dead.

I prepare the dead for release.

Bending into the porcelain whiteness of the bathtub, I lean very close to his embalmed body and whisper one last time.

Goodbye, Father. (208)

This symbolic ceremony not only casts away her father's ghost but also claims her identity. In order to help others, Wu Lan realizes that she has to exorcise the demons inside her first. Instead of escaping, like the way she disengages her father's spirit, Wu Lan eventually learns to deal with it in her own "exorcist" profession as a psychologist.

Like Wu Lan, Chat Mui meets a male scholar named Koh Tian Chin on an occasional visit at the temple. Koh Tian Chin writes a Chinese character "思" to Chat

Mui because this character represents Chat Mui's feelings at that moment. “思,” meaning “to contemplate” or “to think,” is made up of two words: the one on the top “田” meaning “field” and below is “心” meaning “heart.” Two words together create a new word, suggesting that the heart is like a field where people can grow whatever they yearn for. This Chinese character translates Chat Mui's emotions, as she narrates, “The character for thought has become mine, without even education or money. I too can enjoy a word, feel its beauty and peace calm me” (109). Chat Mui is excited to realize the power of words that magically materializes inner feelings of a person.

Like *My Year of Meats, This Place Called Absence* also presents its feminist ideas through negative representations of male characters. Most obviously, all the narrators are women, telling stories about their suffering in a patriarchal society. Male characters in the novel are presented in two major types: the male clients in brothels who exploit female bodies and abuse women with violence, or the “father” figure who is either manipulative or absent. For instance, the death of father is an evident metaphor suggesting decaying patriarchal force. Wu Lan's father exists as an absent persona, or rather, in the form of “spirit.” Unable to endure the torture of psychosomatic pain, he kills himself by swallowing sleeping pills with alcohol. Such a choice to end his life, for Wu Lan and her brother Michael, is irresponsible and cowardly. Regarding her father's suicide, Wu Lan confesses, “I admit that I've judged Father's suicide as an act of cowardice” (65). Her brother Michael also comments that his father is a wimp for choosing suicide to end his life (128).

Men in Chat Mui and Ah Choi's story are notorious villains. Ah Choi mourns for her lost connection with mother and rejects her relation with father. She imagines her mother's body: "How could my mother have borne all her children? I can't imagine her sorrow. But if her blood courses through me, then I must still know her in a mysterious way. Does her blood thicken mine, does mine echo with her silences?" (136). Unable to know for certain her mother's silent thoughts, Ah Choi can only imagine her mother's sorrow and pain. Ah Choi feels that her mother's blood is no longer connected to her body after all those years away from home and family; she exists like a bloodless ghost wandering in a foreign country. In despair, Ah Choi claims, "My mother's blood must end here. And my father's, his blood disappeared from my body when he sold me" (136). Ah Choi's father sells her to the brothel. After that, he always writes letters asking Ah Choi to send money back home. Ah Choi resents her father, who uses her body for money, as she narrates, "Father, how you betrayed me! Show some remorse. Can't you see, you have caused me great suffering?" (154). She renounces her relation with her father the day she is sold and abandoned by her family. This renunciation of father-daughter relation, similar to the ritual of Wu Lan's farewell to her father's ghost, invalidates and disclaims the power of "father."

Chat Mui's father sexually abuses her the way the male clients do. When she arrives in Singapore, Wong Ah Sek, the son of the brothel's owner, also violates Chat Mui's body and forces her to become a prostitute. Initially, Chat Mui thinks of Wong Ah Sek as the man she can spend her life with, but he is merely another blood-sucking manipulator. Since Ah Choi dies, Chat Mui has been copying the word "思" in her

room to mourn for Ah Choi, hoping that the power of this word can relieve her sadness. When Wong Ah Sek discovers those copies in Chat Mui's room, he tries to destroy them. Angered by his brutality, Chat Mui fatally stabs him and runs away from the brothel.

The novel ends with reconciliation between Mahmee and Wu Lan. Although Wu Lan has been estranged from Mahmee, Mahmee gradually understands her daughter's struggle in life. In her narrative, Mahmee admits knowing Wu Lan's difference from the beginning, but she has never talked about it. Initially, Mahmee is worried about Wu Lan's leave of absence because of Yen's death, but Mahmee realizes that such an absence might help Wu Lan recover from the trauma of losing her father. Mahmee connects her feelings with her daughter based on women's shared material experience: "We women have a delicacy men don't have. Men don't have menses like us. Bleeding every month and we're still around!" (124). After all the melancholia and depression, Wu Lan decides to go back to Singapore to welcome the upcoming birth of her niece. Mahmee is excited about it, as she says, "Oh Lan-Lan, still mine! After all these years of silence. Blood is thicker than water, I say" (198). Mahmee does not believe in forgive-and-forget; instead, she thinks, "Bitterness must be just right for problem. Then swallow it, think of good things can do when no longer sick" (198). Mahmee believes the bitterness is an inevitable psychological reaction to unusual incidents in life, but the only way to eradicate the negative feeling of bitterness is to swallow it, face it, and deal with it. Mahmee's ignorance of homosexual lifestyles contributes to the gap between mother and daughter. Nonetheless, this missing link is eventually filled with

understanding and love after Mahmee suddenly realizes that happiness is the most important pursuit in one's life.

At the end of the novel, Kwa does not provide the lesbian lovers in the novel with a positive result for their forbidden love. After she loses her money, Ah Choi kills herself by swallowing the opium paste, leaving Chat Mui mourning over her death. Chat Mui, with the help of Koh Tian Chin, who relieves the pain from her opium addiction, escapes from Singapore to Java and starts a new life. Tian Chin suggests that they get married so that his family in Java will take care of her. Given that Koh Tian Chin confesses to Chat Mui that his love is "reserved for men" (205), they still have to follow the heteronormative tradition to legitimize their identity as a married couple. On the other hand, Wu Lan's ex-lover Kim breaks up with her because Kim decides to get married and have a "normal" family life. After that, Wu Lan stumbles in her relationships. Kwa fails to find justice for her homosexual characters. Does she deliberately portray her homosexual characters, who have to succumb to heteronormative values, or does she simply intend to present the situations of the homosexual characters in terms of absence and invisibility in society?

Conclusion

With the rapid growth of Asian North American literature, its focus no longer stays in only North America but expands to global concern about people around the world. Asian North American female writers are beginning to share their female sensibility and experience with their allies in Asia and develop a transnational network

to address the issue of female trauma beyond the boundaries of time and space. While academia has emphasized the concept of crossing boundaries between genres, races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and many others, the crossing of nation-state boundary has also created a new paradigm that decenters the ideology of cultural nationalism and valorizes transnational culturalism. Culture, in this regard, is no longer confined within a certain geopolitical territory but furthers all-encompassing cultural diversification. Ozeki and Kwa broaden readers' horizons on the immense potentiality of literary imagination in Asian North American literature. Their female characters cross different kinds of boundaries and establish alliances that share their feminist assertions. The novels also include transcultural agents to participate in the dialogue of global concerns of transnational feminist discourses. Such an effort not only helps fortify the networking of women around the globe but also exemplifies the detotalization of Eurocentric feminist discourses. In *My Year of Meats*, the connection between Jane and Akiko demonstrates the concept of women's global affiliation that fights against patriarchal hegemony and violence to women across geographical boundaries. In *This Place Called Absence*, Kwa's female characters find reconnection with one another through different time and space. Although they never really have an actual encounter and conversation, their mutual experience as lesbians forbidden by the heteronormative society has illustrated this trauma of being the *other* in the margins of society.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: TRAUMA CONTINUES

Trauma exists in private memory and public history. Trauma victims often transcribe their experiences in a written form given that writing serves as an effective medium for trauma victims to recollect memory and review history. In order to understand what trauma represents in a socio-historical context, interpreting trauma becomes an important task to integrate the past with the present, while “[t]he past can be personal or collective, recent or remote; an artifact of psychoanalysis or an act of witness; a primordial myth or a use of ancestral spirits to account for misfortune or violation” (Farrell 14). Interpreting trauma is not only to retrieve traumatic memories of victims but also to associate different factors that may contribute to traumatization, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and class distinctions, which construct the interdiscursivity of trauma. For racial, gender, class, and sexual minorities who suffer from prejudices and discriminations, their literature often reflects their traumatization and discontent as the Others and remonstrates the hegemony of the empowered in society.

As a scholar of Asian North American Studies, I regard this research work as an important academic accomplishment. For one reason, as one of the few trauma studies on ANA literature, this work discusses how ANA members recount their traumatization through fictional narratives that blend autobiographical or ethnographical subtexts,

along with their historiographic criticism. These select ANA novels not only are written by authors of different Asian ethnicities but also illustrate the diversity of textuality and themes, as well as the continuous representation of trauma experienced by ANA members throughout history. I am aware that such a focus on ANA culture and literature may be misunderstood as *Asian-centric*. Although it is not my intention to canonize ANA literature, it is inevitable for me as a member of the Asian minority to take a side and feel sympathetic of the invisibility and silence of ANA members in a multicultural society where their literature is neglected due to their cultural disparity and sociopolitical disempowerment.

Many people believe that Asian Americans reside mostly on the East and West Coasts, especially in major cities of Washington and California, where most Asian American studies are conducted. Similarly, in Canada, Asian Canadian literature is such a minor academic area that only higher educational institutions in more Asian-populated provinces, like British Columbia and Ontario, have academics specializing in it. I used to think that Asian North American literature should be offered in schools with more Asian-origin student body. Other than reading Euro-American literature with the emphasis of western religions and cultural traditions, Asian North American students should have an option to choose a literature course related to their race/ethnicity.²⁵

However, I realize that it is a problematic logic to evaluate the necessity of including Asian North American literature in college curriculum based on the quotas of Asian

²⁵ According to the 2006 U.S. Demographic Census, the top ten states with the most Asian populations are: Hawaii (39.9%), California (12.3%), New Jersey (7.5%), New York (6.9%), Washington (6.6%),

student body. In such multicultural countries as America and Canada, if literature written by authors of Asian descent is part of the literary productions of a nation-state, any generalist courses of American or Canadian literature should always incorporate Asian North American literature into the curriculum. It is reductive to think that schools should offer Asian North American literature courses simply because there are more Asian North American students in certain regions. This logic not only diminishes the value of ANA literature but also marginalizes the importance of ANA literature at institutions located in where Asian minorities are less visible. Meanwhile, David Palumbo-Liu points out:

A critical multiculturalism explores the fissures, tensions, and sometimes contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively. It instead maps out the terrain of common interest while being attentive to the different angles of entry into this terrain. (4-5)

Therefore, while elevating the academic concern of ANA literature with a good intention, I also maintain a critical perspective to detect the issues and ruptures in this particular racial minority literature without falling in the trap of ideological ethnocentrism.

Given that most trauma studies have been contributed primarily to the Holocaust and veterans, this singular focus on a specific group's traumatization neglects traumatic

Nevada (5.9%), Maryland (4.9%), Massachusetts (4.8%), Virginia (4.8%), and Alaska (4.5%). In Texas, there is 3.3% of the Asian population of the entire country. (<http://lehd.did.census.gov>)

sufferings of other minorities in North America and fails to view racial traumatization on an equal plane. Trauma studies critic Kalí Tal argues:

Within a society, there may be several targeted groups, whose members are subject to traumatization in greater or lesser degrees. Targeted groups can and should be examined both in relation to the dominant group and to each other. In the United States, Jews are only one of several targeted groups. Though discriminated against, Jews do not suffer from violent racism or systematic economic oppression. Other targeted groups—women and racial minorities, for example—are at higher risk of traumatic assault. (9)

Tal reminds us that although all the trauma victims deserve sympathy and respect, there is always an ongoing traumatization to certain minority groups that cannot be overlooked. For example, racial minorities are subject to be systematically discriminated against by the dominant group because of their different racial backgrounds and cultural practices. Their difference is defined by their phenotypical features, such as skin color and physiognomy written on their bodies. These innate physical differences cannot be disguised and will always be their visible racial markers in public. As long as racialization exists, it is improbable for them to escape from potential ongoing racial victimization and stereotyping. In the case of Jews, the Holocaust is one of the notable anti-Semitic discriminations in Jewish history. Jews suffered from the ideology of racial hierarchy invented by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II, as well as systematic persecution and genocide of

the Nazis. Many of them came to North America to escape from the massacre. In North America, because they have similar religious and cultural backgrounds, most Jews successfully assimilate into mainstream society. Moreover, generally considered as part of the dominant group (i.e. Caucasians), Jews are not subject to systematic racism as constantly as other racial minority groups. As for veterans, they are traumatized in battlefields, but after wars, they are not subject to systematic oppression and discrimination in North America. Aware of ongoing trauma to certain minority groups, Tal argues that the term “trauma survivor” becomes problematic. If the potential of repeated traumatization will always ensue in the lives of racial minorities, they will never “survive” (9). Her point illustrates that our concern of trauma to targeted minority groups will sustain because they are most likely exposed to repeated traumatic encounters. As long as they are constantly exposed to the trauma of systematic racism in society, they will continue to produce trauma narratives addressing their traumatic experiences. By understanding their trauma, we also hope to bring social justice and public consensus in order to appease the pain they are suffering.

Tal’s alert of ongoing systematic oppressions in minorities (including racial and sexual minorities, women and children) reminds us of minority literature’s accomplishment of reinscribing traumatic experiences of minorities in private memory and public history. While trauma writing continues to reinscribe traumatic victims’ experiences, we need to learn from history about various causations of trauma and prevent them from recurring. Besides, as Cathy Caruth remarks that trauma is contagious, we should also pay attention to the continuum of trauma transferred from

one generation to another to see how trauma is perpetuated in the psyche of minority members and how trauma's complexity affects their perception of temporal and spatial realities.

While making a conclusion at this point, I realize that some issues still remain unsolved. For example, I discussed the racialized trauma of double consciousness in Asian minorities. This racialized trauma is in fact identifiable in any one of the eight novels discussed in the project. All of them exemplify the characters' struggle of double consciousness pervasively. I argue that double consciousness is an ideological dualism that demarcates multiple possibilities of racial minorities' identification. There should be a third alternative outside the dualistic frame of reference for racial minorities to explore. However, I question whether this third alternative needs to be defined. Or rather, is it definable? For me, this concept of "beyond double consciousness" is a symbolic trope that goes against the structured identificatory system of racial minorities controlled by mainstream leverage. The dominant group seeks to place every minority group into a politically correct category and maintain the social order and racial hierarchy in a nation-state to secure the dominant group's status as a supervising authority. The multiple identities of Asian North Americans are meant to disrupt this system of totalization and appeal for an alternative path for their social roles over racialization. If this alternative needs to be defined to be understood, would this definition create another ideological constraint?

Another remaining issue that needs further contemplation is (anti)assimilation of racial minorities. I argue that in order to claim their material existence (as opposed to

their invisibility in society) and social contribution, assimilation seems to be an inevitable process for members of racial minority to participate in the mainstream society's activities, such as politics, education, media, or publishing. Assimilating may have its viability for racial minorities to find convenience and success in their lives and a definitive national identity. However, my greatest concern is that such a cultural assimilation will evaporate racial minorities' collective identification toward their cultural heritage and tradition and homogenize cultural disparities. How possible is it for members of racial minorities to assimilate into mainstream culture on the one hand and still maintain their own cultural heritage on the other hand without being completely melted into a pot that favors the dominant group?

This research work on trauma in Asian North American literature is merely the tip of an iceberg. I am well aware that it only covers a very limited portion of Asian North American literature. I am conscious that different racial minorities experience trauma differently. In the pan-Asian community, different ethnic groups experience trauma in dissimilar ways as well. Additionally, this project covers only certain examples of ANA members' traumatic experiences, so it cannot provide an all-inclusive representation of trauma experienced by *all* ANA members. Also, I only analyze prose narratives and fail to explore short fiction, poetry, and drama in ANA literature. There are still numerous underrepresented works waiting to be unearthed and discussed. I am confident that many ANA works that deal with trauma have yet to be discovered. All these missing pieces will be taken into consideration in my future research projects.

Regretfully, I am unable to enclose writers of a variety of Asian ethnicities as possible as I can in my studies. While determining the texts to be included in my dissertation, I had to select only eight novels out of an ever expanding pool of Asian North American fiction and give up some excellent works, like Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (Korean) and Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (Chinese), Susan Choi's *American Woman* (Korean, a one-time Pulitzer Prize nominee), Don Lee's *Country of Origin* (Korean), Fiona Cheong's *The Scent of the God* (Singaporean), Patricia Chao's *Monkey King* (Chinese), Lan Samantha Chang's *Inheritance* (Chinese), and the list goes on. This also means that there will be many exciting research projects waiting for ANA scholars to accomplish.

As an intellectual always curious about different cultural productions, I seek to broaden my academic interests in cultural studies and global concerns of North American literature, arts, films, theatre, and media, to further develop a comparative project that crosses the boundaries of different disciplines and connects North America with the rest of the world. My forthcoming research project is to discover the voice of the diaspora of Southeast Asian refugees, such as Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Thais, and Hmongs. After the 1970s, an influx of refugees from Southeast Asia came into North America. Their existence as a diaspora has not been well discussed in the academy. Through their literature, I would like to find out how a diasporic body performs in an Anglo-based dominant culture and narrates its memory of homeland and cross-cultural experience, as well as its difference from earlier Asian immigrants' experience. The representative texts I will be working on includes Lan Cao's *Monkey*

Bridge, T.C. Huo's *Land of Smiles*, Le Thi Diem Thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, and Lawrence Chua's *Gold by the Inch*.

This ending note is in essence not a conclusion. Instead, it is rather an opening statement that proclaims an inchoate phase of trauma studies in Asian North American literature. Trauma will never disappear; it continues to (re)emerge in every possible form. Because of this contingency, Asian North American writers will continue to represent traumatic experiences of their people in their communities. By completing this work, I am looking forward to seeing more scholars find Asian North American literature inspiring and participate in the development of trauma studies in Asian North American literature.

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