

Asian American Forms: From Realism to Modernism

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**Abstract**

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The subject of this dissertation, to boldly state it, is the history of Asian American literary formation. The tradition of formalist criticism of literature, reaching down from the Russian formalist school, has been confronted with suspicion and modified by the Marxist revolution of the notion of “form.” Realism and modernism converge in my investigation of Asian American literary forms, along with other equally “cliché” literary and cultural concepts, including satire, the Bildungsroman, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and identity. However, to return to this *formal* tradition of literary criticism is not to canonize Asian American literature or treat Asian American literature as a fixed philosophical abstraction. By re-introducing the formal method to Asian American literary studies, I will examine the historical formation of Asian American fictions, which are categorized with three thematic features—survival, transformation, and contradiction. From survival to transformation to contradiction, from realism to modernism, Asian American fiction has experienced and reflected the demographic vicissitudes of Asian America in its adaptation of different forms. The study of form points to the extension of Asian American literature from a domestic enlightenment project to a transnational, diasporic observation.

Each of the three body chapters centers on one category and closely examines two novels that represent the features of that category: *America Is in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan and *All I Asking for Is My Body* by Milton Murayama for survival fiction, *Donald Duk* by Frank Chin and *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee for transformation fiction, and *Fixer Chao* by Han Ong and *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri for contradiction fiction. Applying realism, modernism and various sub-forms as the formal method, I argue that the progression of Asian American forms testifies to the active autonomy of literature in Asian American studies. In my argumentation, I tend to resume literary criticism in Asian American literary studies and study Asian American literature as literature instead of a mere cultural production or a historical continuation, without discharging its historicity.

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The work of a dissertation writer is not easy. We risk very much and yet gain very little at every step of writing. It's not up to us to decide which part of the dissertating is worth doing and which part is a waste. We offer up our work and ourselves to others' judgment. There are countless times when we are at the mercy of others. We determine our value through others. We are not at free will in writing. We are held to standards and judgments that have thrived over decades and succeed the old-school type of writing that sometimes only imparts a message of beauty. Dissertating, at some point, is analogous to household chores, which would make the housewife slave away for a temporary moment of cleanness and yet still have to face endless humdrum that is pointless and unappreciable to her husband and children.

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## Introduction

### *I. Some Preliminaries: Why Form?*

Introductions always get written last, perhaps years after some of the work they are supposed to “introduce.” Rereading one’s own work, one immediately notices mistakes and gaps, the ideas that seem so obvious now but which then—God knows why—seemed impossible to grasp. One would like to discard everything and start afresh—or at least look forward, not back, and pursue what has not yet been done, without worrying about making presentable what has long since been left behind.

—Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*

This introduction got written last. Moretti has partially explained why. Besides, it is absolutely a hellacious mission to comprehend the term and the field, *Asian American literature*, which is probably the most problematic concept of Asian American studies. But let’s assume it is a valid concept because no matter how controversial this term is, it is not the focus of my dissertation. After all, in the field of humanities, what term isn’t debatable?

The historical geographies of Asian America differ in accordance with its ethnicities: Chinese American culture was inaugurated in urban bases, Japanese agrarian bases, and Filipinos mobile plantations. But in literature, they share commonality in forms: unlike the Western literary historical evolution from epic and romance to fiction, the development of Asian American literary genres follows the trend from poems and autobiographies to novels. Asian American literary history started with autobiographies and poems, or fictions with autobiographical components. But this dissertation is dealing with only fictions, a form I am familiar with and have been focusing on during my study in English. The topic of this

dissertation pays respect to Colleen Lye's 2008 essay, "Racial Form," in which Lye expresses a formalist desire of recounting Asian American literary criticism. Noticing that the Asian America/n is in fact a "subjectless discourse" and "an institutionalized (academic and governmental) sociological category," Lye rationalizes a formalistic approach to Asian American literary studies because "a focus on form may provide an initial bridge between the notion of race as a representation and the notion of race as constitutive of literary and other social formation" (95-96). According to Lye, race has been always examined as formation rather than form due to the great influence of Omi and Winant's historicization of race. The problem with their theorization of racial formation is that their theory leads all discussions around race to racism as if race is a product of racism. Oriented by Raymond Williams' historical materialism, Lye argues that the route of form studies will morph the problem of race into "a question of the relationship between...race understood as representation and race as an agency of literary and other social formations" (99).

I hope that my dissertation will fill this gap in Asian American literary studies until more comprehensive and systematic research on the Asian American literary form is carried on. I still mean to avoid the problem of formalistic accesses denoted by traditional formalists that often isolate the art object from its social and historical contexts and relationships. But in my attention to the literary forms adopted by Asian American writers, I do intend to explore how social relationships are presented in varying Asian American literary forms. Though the term *Asian American* "privileges the historical over the cultural, or rather, it insists that the cultural is necessarily historical, delimited by territorial and temporal materialities" (Li, "The State and Subject of Asian American Criticism" 604), Asian American literary studies liberates Asian American studies from a confinement of grand, institutionalized discourses that have been taken

over by historical and sociological studies. A close examination of Asian American literary forms proves that though Asian American culture behaves like an iconoclast or even an outcast disinherited by the American national discourses, it is not unattached to the Western discursive formation. Instead of distinguishing *Asian* from *American* within the concept of Asian America/n, the study of form will indicate that Asian America/n is not devoid of either of these two entities; Asian America is not an absolute, stagnant negation of white America or ancestral Asia. Rather, its adaption of the Western literary forms and its modification of these forms to its concrete historical and social specificities further demonstrate a possible integrity within Asian America and facilitate a better understanding of the continually altering Asian American demography and its cultural dynamics. Furthermore, the form study will help the English departments in American institutions further identify the presence of Asian American literature.

I will borrow from Jinqi Ling to further demonstrate the importance of the formal method. Ling is one of the few Asian Americanists, if any, who proposes a formalist approach to Asian American literary studies. Colleen Lye notes that Ling's focus on Asian American literary realism "provides him with the ground for a theoretical argument waged dually against Asian American cultural studies' neglect of formal considerations and history" ("Form and History" 549). Lye has published a comprehensive and argumentative book review of Ling's *Narrating Nationalism* in contrast to Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*. Ling is very straightforward about the then academic environment of Asian American literary criticism that spurred his research: content over form, contemporary over traditional (v). The former backdrop continues to pose as the mainstream Asian American discursive domains, which maintain their emphasis on the social, political, and historical functions of literature. The second aspect of the academic milieu is not unique in Asian American literary criticism; it is a universal phenomenon in all fields of literary

studies. Ling's realism study not only resurrects the realist representations of Asian American writers' contingent claims of essence but also historicizes the traditional Asian American realist texts by rethinking the transition of Asian American literature from its traditional, realist narrative to contemporary, post/modernist practice. He argues that a study of form will deconstruct the reading practice of cultural studies that always "equates the articulation of individual Asian American writers at given historical moments in the period with the actual presence of fully realized Asian American agency" (10). The form study will free the reading practice from ideological analyses that is admonished within a sociological framework and return the text to its literary paradigm.

Ten years apart, Ling and Lye have rationalized the significance of form study. However, up till today, form study has not yet been institutionally or systematically practiced in Asian American studies. Built upon the antecedents' effort in reevaluating the function of form and repositioning the study of form in Asian American literary studies, my dissertation will historicize the transition of Asian American literary forms in accordance with the transformation of Asian America and its studies.

## II. *Form Defined: A Brief Historical Overview*

Raymond Williams summarizes two principally relevant definitions of *form*: (i) "a visible or outward shape, with a strong sense of the physical body"; (ii) "an essential shaping principle, making indeterminate material into a determinate or specific being or thing" (*Keywords* 138). The study of form, or formalism, is chiefly used in negative ways in that it is always related to the physical, aesthetical principle of form and thus disregards historical and social contexts of the literary works. When Asian American literary studies appeared alongside the emergence of

Asian American studies in the late 1960s, such literary formalist criticism has already been announced dead. Epitomized by the Russian formalism of the 1920s, this formalist school is limited to “‘purely’ aesthetic interests” by emphasizing the first definition of form and defends the ideas of “art for art’s sake” (Williams, *Keywords* 139). “‘Vulgar’ Marxists,” whose concerns are merely laid in social content and ideological tendency, therefore proposed a rigorous revolution of literary criticism concerning form: they completely abandon and dismiss form as “an artifice, externally imposed on the turbulent content of history itself” (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 23). Meanwhile in the battle between form (aesthetic appearance) and content (social being), dialectical Marxism placed its focus on the notion of form as a shaping principle and developed formalism into a *formal* method that addresses the reciprocal relationship between form and content and determines the present Western literary criticism.

The unity of form and content liberates the conception of *form* from the mere “‘materials’ of forms,” such as “words, sounds, and notations, as in speech and writing” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 190). Form, in a Marxist reading, is equivalent to *formation*, or in Raymond Williams’ words, “a relationship,” as it depends on “its perception as well as its creation” (*Marxism and Literature* 187). The form-content relationship has been long before discussed by Hegel and Marx, both of whom share the belief that “[f]orms are historically determined by the kind of ‘content’ they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down and revolutionized as that content itself changes” (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 22). György (or Georg) Lukács advances the application of form and, by calling forms “the true bearers of ideology in art,” attaches form entirely to the ideological content (Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* 24). From *The Theory of the Novel* to *The Historical Novel*, Lukács in his readings of European literatures specifies his discussion of form and addresses the formative

process of fiction from realism to modernism, though he blames the appearance of modernism for inaugurating the decline of the novel.

Influenced by Lukács, form is translated into a physical, structural creation that reflects the perception of human relationships. There is no form without content and vice versa. Literature is read within an historical and thematic scope rather than a purely aesthetic and stylistic one. The Marxist revolution transposes literature and the study of form from an experience of absolute artistic enjoyment to a critical cultural process. The formal method should be deliberated as “a social and historical theory based on the materiality of language and the related materiality of cultural production” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 187). In this revolution of literary criticism, realism and modernism as two distinctive literary forms are the most discussed. These two literary forms are as well actively and felicitously practiced in Asian American literary creation and thus become the foci of my argumentation.

### *III. Form Matters: Asian American Literature and Asian American Studies*

Susan Koshy in her 1996 essay, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” analyzes the dynamics of Asian American literature and the disparate progress of Asian American Studies and Asian American literary studies. Koshy bases her inquiry on the premise that Asian America contains a more transnational scope than it did in the 1960s when *Asian America/n* commenced its institutionalization as an essentialized discourse. While this demographic transformation has been reflected in its literature, Asian American Studies remitted its scholarly investigation of these shifts. As of 1996, Koshy points out, Asian American Studies, instead of launching an

engaging investigation into the increasing transnational nature and locus of modern Asian America<sup>1</sup>,

has either continued to rely on paradigms of ethnicity produced in the inaugural moment of the field, or has sought to incorporate the changes through the fashionable but derivative vocabulary of post-modernism, post-colonialism or post-structuralism; formulaic invocations of “multiculturalism,” “hybridity,” “plural identities,” or “border-crossing” are used promiscuously without any effort to link them to the material, cultural or historical specificities of the various Asian American experiences. (316)

According to Koshy, that modern Asian American Studies has *canonized* certain literary texts through a repetition and concentration on original literary productions that are mostly Chinese and Japanese American-centered. New immigrants’ literary works have either been ignored or subjected to the pattern set up by the original, outmoded Asian American ideology, which is “to repudiate the prevailing stereotype of Asians as perpetual foreigners in America, and to affirm the experiences of the many Asians in America at this time, who are several generations removed from the homeland experience” (325). Koshy calls for a critical transformation of the paradigms, not simply a reductive and essentialized appendix to the over-the-hill Asian American Studies ideology. The shifts of the theoretical frameworks for Asian American literary productions must be rested upon the extant Asian American experiences in the era of transnationalism and globalization, rather than recycling and accommodating “disparate cultural products into the existing categories of their [Asian Americanist] discipline, or into the convenient catch-all terms generated by pluralism” (331).

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<sup>1</sup> By “modern,” I refer to the post-1965 Asian America, which under the repercussion of the 1965 immigration laws has been undergoing a highly stratified, uneven, and heterogeneous landscape-changing conjugation with a rapid flow of new immigrants from Asia.

What is arresting about Koshy's argument is her vigilance of the stale tendency of Asian American Studies. It is understandable that she equates Asian American studies with Asian American literary studies throughout her essay; after all, Asian American literary studies never claimed its independence from Asian American studies. But Asian American literary studies has an especial dilemma: its literary agency does not always coincide with the pan-Asian American consciousness while its criticism surrenders to its social and political functions, which define the direction of the Asian American ideology. Literature pulls its criticism ahead, but criticism cannot always catch up with literature. Literary criticism in Asian American studies in particular has already encountered its "crisis" caused by the intervention and domination of political, ideological concerns that are stressed in sociological and historical studies. In order not to fall behind the development of cultural criticism, literary criticism sometimes becomes negligent of its own source—the literature. For instance, Han Ong's *Fixer Chao* has failed to arouse much interest among Asian American critics for the reason that it does not quite correspond with any armature determined by Asian American racial politics. Similarly, Ha Jin has hardly received any attention from Asian Americanists because the majority of his works are about China even though he writes in English. As of the close of the first decade in the twenty-first century, such a situation has not changed much. It is sad for Asian American studies to stay this way: in a sense, the institutionalization of Asian American studies took place under the "aegis" of its literature. Today, we still read novels and poems and study them; but Asian American literature and literary studies have become subordinate to other disciplines of Asian American studies.

On a microscopic level, such a dilemma of Asian American literary studies has three layers. First of all, it is attached to Asian American history and historical studies. E. San Juan, Jr. alludes to the importance of literary narratives in stating Asian American history through his

review of Ronald Takaki's methodology: "By a montage of personal testimony— anecdotes, letters, songs, telegrams, eyewitness reports, confessions, album photographs, quotidian fragments, clichés and banalities of everyday life—juxtaposed with statistics, official documents, reprise of punctual events, Takaki skillfully renders a complex drama of Asians enacting and living their own history," which becomes Takaki's "art of history" ("Beyond Identity Politics" 278). But this implication also proves the existent function of literature in the interdisciplinary Asian American Studies: it is able to be used as documentation for Asian American sociologists and historians to prove the unanimity of Asian American communities' experience and consciousness because they believe that the individual experiences correspond to that experience and consciousness of the collectivity. Therefore, secondly, Asian American literature never had a system of literary criticism of its own. It is either superseded by historical studies as in early Asian American literary studies or replaced by cultural studies as in contemporary moments. For example, the literary critic Lisa Lowe confesses that deals with fiction as "a cultural institution that regulates formations of citizenship and the nation, genders the domains of 'public' and 'private' activities, prescribes the spatialization of race relations, and, most of all, determines possible contours and terrains for the narration of 'history'" (*Immigrant Acts* 98). This phenomenon is also self-evident in the two book-length literary studies by Elaine Kim (1982) and Sau-ling Wong (1993). Lastly, Koshy points out that, unlike Anglo-American or African-American literatures, "Asian American literature inhabits the highly unstable temporality of the 'about-to-be,' its meanings continuously reinvented after the arrival of new groups of immigrants and the enactment of legislative changes" ("The Fiction of Asian American Literature" 315); the consequence of the instability of the Asian American populace in terms of its ethnicity, migrant experiences, religions, cultures, and classes renders the subject of Asian America "fictional." Not

only is the deferral of the meaning-designation to the new joiners a magnificent challenge Asian American Studies has to encounter, but also the cacophony of literary works produced by new migrants, diasporas, or transnational subjects demand their articulation and recognition in the definition of Asian American literature.

To reposition Asian American literary studies, that is, to study Asian American literature as literature instead of a mere cultural production or a historical continuation, is not to discharge its historicity. It should be acknowledged that literary studies *per se* does not dismantle the integrity of Asian American Studies or disengage from the cultural or political scopes of Asian American discourses. Rather, it should become a paradigm that inhabits Lowe's idealistic proposal of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity. It investigates in a literary history that adjoins Asian American social history, instead of being enveloped by the latter. It allows for recognition of differential and even dissonant insertion of the various national groups with inequitable bounds to Asia. It utters multiple voices that do not have to be "ours" and thus disavows any easy, convenient assumption of Asian American uniaxial identity.

This paradigm might not be possible in the early phases of Asian American Studies. Stephen H. Sohn, Paul Lai, and Donald C. Goellnicht write, "There is now a rough consensus that Asian American literary and cultural studies have gone through three overlapping phases: the cultural nationalist phase of the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the feminist phase that was dominant from the late 1970s through about 1990 (and still ongoing), and the transnational or diasporic phase from about 1990 on" (2). Their observation echoes Koshy's account of the modern phenomenon of Asian America and its interdisciplinary studies. Though subscribing to a Western form for its literature, Asian American writers have never launched a realist or modernist movement. Asian American literature, the inaugural articulation of Asian American

narratives, is subdued by Asian American cultural studies ever since 1965 when Asian American studies began its institutionalization expedition. In the age of transnationalism, can Asian American literary studies resume a new position in Asian American Studies as an independent and critical paradigm that responds to the demands of the new era? This question may not be answered in this dissertation. But it is set up with a hope of redeeming a structuralist foundation that is always left out in a post-structuralist discourse of Asian American Studies.

#### *IV. Realism and Modernism/Post-modernism: A Battle within the Asian American Literary Form*

Despite Asian Americanists' attempt to demonstrate how distracted Asian American literature is from the mainstream xenophobic American literature, it may be a unanimous insight that Asian American realism originates from American realism. Realism can make the story feel "real" because every "realistic novel gives us innumerable details: how people look, what they wear, where they live" (Price 69). In Asian American realistic novels, such a pattern is usually repeated in the writers' display and introduction of their ethnic traditions with the wish of presenting the Asian or non-Asian American audience an accurate sketch of Asian America. But the novel lies: no matter how real realism makes the story appear, action is created towards an end and so are the characters (Bowen 249). Descending from an autobiographical tradition, the Asian American realist and the reader—in particular non-Asian American ones—are sometimes confused about the complexity and plausibility of the fictional world. Therefore, the reader may look for "truth" in Asian American novels while the writer is happy to deliver such knowledge or sometimes an illusion. Hence the well-known controversy over Maxine Hong Kingston's *The*

*Woman Warrior*, “which was first formulated along the lines of autobiographical accuracy, cultural authenticity, and ethnic representativeness” (Shu 200)<sup>2</sup>.

The misreading of the Kingstons is a presumptuous gesture of the American readership that dissociates the form of Asian American fiction from the generic self-representing tradition of the novel. Tony Jackson proves that the novel—especially the earlier fiction—faces the problem of self-authorization because “the novel lacks, unlike most of the other successful literary forms, a clear Latin or Greek predecessor” (35). Standing “apart from the time-proven classical literary genres,” the novel initially suffers from a want of “ready grounding of an already authorized and authorizing readership” (Jackson 35). When reading the Kingstons, the well-trained American readers suddenly forget this tradition of the novel and assume the writer’s self-authorizing activities as truthful. This reading experience may also coincide with the political and social sensitivity of Asian American literature. It is truism that Asian American literature was never a purely literary activity. Fiction, preceded by autobiography in the Asian American literary tradition, became the dominant form for Asian American writers, whose job was to seek a voice and visibility for their ethnic groups within the mainstream cultural society of the United States. This mission is in accordance with the historical survival experience of Asian Americans and thus essentially defines Asian American literature as being politically sensitive. Such political consciousness of literature itself reasonably and naturally leads to the politicality of its criticism, and enables its interdisciplinarity as scholars from fields other than literature can touch upon the politicality of any literary texts. As a result, little scholarship has undertaken thorough research on the Asian American literary forms: to talk about form is somewhat a self-alienating behavior in Asian American studies. Even fewer scholars have taken

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<sup>2</sup> When *The Woman Warrior* was first published in 1976, it was branded “non-fiction” and treated as an autobiography of Kingston.

the realistic form of Asian American literature seriously. The reason for such conscious neglect is partially due to the dramatic reversal of realism in American literary history. Compared with structuralism, modernism, colonial, Marxism, and any other theoretical paradigms with an affix of *post-*, realism has been vastly criticized for its conservative tendency and complicity with class-based structures. Unfortunately, this criticism has in fact a solid ground.

A literary form is an expression of a specific historical era; thus it allows the reader to work from the text toward its historical representation, from the form to the content—or the dominant ideology in its moment. American realism succeeded romanticism and preceded naturalism. Since the form speaks for a certain group of people in terms of race, class, and gender, it is transitive and fluid in a historical sense because the old form has to give way to the one that represents a more advanced, competitive ideology. In other words, to study form will facilitate an inquiry of the historical specificity that is mirrored in the text. But when the form study is related to the Asian American discourses, here comes a predicament. Asian Americanism, due to Asian American history of racial construction, suppression, and violence, has an essentialist claim for visibility and inclusion. The Asian American ideology is identity politics, race-based, left-winged, and transcendent of individual agency. With such an imperative ideology, Asian American literature seems incapable of making a move in its form unless its contingent claim for America is altered. Then how is the advancement of Asian American discourse reflected in its literary forms? When realism is insufficient to speak for Asian America, what Asian American ideology is embodied in modern forms of Asian American literature, such as modernism and postmodernism?

Lisa Lowe and Jingqi Ling have made interesting and relevant arguments on the counterpoise of realism and postmodernism. In her readily noticeable book *Immigrant Acts*,

Lowe attempts to change the traditional, nationalist reading practice of Asian American literature. According to Lowe, realism is a structure of complicity with the Western hegemony. By adopting realism that features verisimilitude, development, and teleology, Asian American literature will easily conform to the same logic of the Euro-centric history's truth effects. The Western master narratives or reading practices displayed in realist texts, such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), "essentialized Asian American culture" and obscured "the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians" (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 63). The alternative history of Asian America necessitates an interception of postmodernism that witnesses the breakdown of master narratives and perceives the interruption of "displacement, decolonization, and disidentification" that serves the crucial "grounds for the emergence of Asian American critique" (*Immigrant Acts* 104). Lowe's criticism of realism and the current academic emphases on social and political representations of Asian American literature triggered Ling's investigation of realism. Ling seeks to champion realism on its own terms. His re-evaluation of traditional realism in essentializing Asian American nationalism by returning realism to "its primary site of production and usage, that is, its affiliations with the literary and with the aesthetic" (Ling 21), connects Asian America's present to its past. Ling reminds the reader that realism is not always conclusive, but at once closed and open. He asserts that in a historical moment when the minority literature was tentative in finding itself a place in the hegemonic Western cultural industry, realism empowered it with a desire for a political, historical, and cultural engagement. Simply dismissing realism as a form of compliance with assimilation and ignoring the role of its historicity "deprives us not only of an important critical resource but also of a part of history in which art's serious commitment to its social and political function was considered either essential or at times even decisive" (Ling 23). Ling thus writes

defensively that the failure to recognize the interposition of Asian American realism in the hegemonic Western literary history stems from the Asian American poststructuralists' negligence of "differential power and unequal access" of Asian American realist texts "to cultural apparatuses or resources" (Ling 10).

Colleen Lye in her review of the intertextual argument between Lowe and Ling suggests that these two opponents are not as antithetical as it seems. In fact, "Ling's argument now looks more and more to be a promising dialectical extension of Lowe's project, or a materialization of her thesis of Asian American cultural hybridity" (Lye, "Form and History" 552). Lye is right about the gist of their counterarguments. After all, Lowe's own claim about Asian American novels is self-contradictory at times. Since her monograph is a collection of essays that were published in different times, her critique in one essay conflicts with that in another. Though she argues against the realist form in the chapter of "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences," she discredits her argument later in the same book when she employs a postcolonial critique of Asian American realism:

Even those novels that can be said to conform more closely to the formal criteria of the bildungsroman express a contradiction between the demand for a univocal developmental narrative and the historical specificities of racialization, ghettoization, violence, and labor exploitation. The kind and degree of contradiction between those historical specificities and the national narrative served by the cultural institution of the novel generates formal deviations whose significances are misread if simply assimilated as modernist or postmodernist aesthetic modes. The effects of these works are more radically grasped in terms of their constant interrogation of the discrepancies between canonical historical

narratives and what Walter Benjamin would term the material “catastrophes” that those histories obscure. (*Immigrant Acts* 100)

When the two opponent arguments somehow reach an agreement through Lye’s analyses, my proposal on the fluidity of form becomes self-evident. In order to understand the continuity in Asian American racial form and its reflective literary forms, the selected texts are not based on ethnic or gender differences but chosen with a particular historical context in mind. Though the reflectivity of the literary texts will be taken into consideration, the social function of these texts will not be included in my discussion. When in fashion, the realist narrative mode supplied a literary context for understanding the movement from awareness of a marginalized identity to ambivalent nationalism. Much of the rejection of realism as a descriptive term “stems from an inability today to see the whole picture—the failure to see the way a fictional and historical world coalesced to produce varied but related texts” (Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism* 255). When out of fashion, realism is unable to commit to a minor history that is criticized and terminated by institutionalized Asian American discourses. Thus enters modernism.

#### *V. Developmental Narratives: Truthful Realism or Bourgeois Modernism?*

While the Western history of novels began with historical fiction, Asian American fictional form started with realism. No one has illustrated why historical fiction and romanticism are rarely put forward by Asian American writers. Whereas romanticism does not answer the request of the Asian American claim for America, historical fiction with the validity in terms of the form itself should be able to describe Asian American experience. But the similarity between romanticism and historical fiction lies in their demand for the presence of a hero. This similarity

renders romanticism and historical fiction illegitimate as Asian American literary forms because the special history of the Asian mass in America does not generate idealistic or historical figures like Don Quixote, Cromwells, or Napoleons. The characters in Asian American literary history are inclined towards anti-heroes. This phenomenon of Asian American literature is the objective corollary of the American nationalist racial construction. Thus, realism serves the purpose of Asian Americanism by aiming at a total picture of the historical background and delineating a subject that is ubiquitous enough to appear in our own lived experience.

Every literary form is initiated as a reform. Realism defined the nineteenth-century novel in British literature and witnessed a reform from religious literature to sectarian one. But even with the social reform itself, realists deal with reform in different manners. The author of the first book-length study of the novel in English, David Masson, recognizes the two different groups of realists in handling reformist subject matters: some realists support a given reform while others condemn it (Claybaugh 31-32). It is also not uncommon that some critics view a realist novel a reformist one while others consider the reform depicted in the same novel as a mere subject matter with no reformist effect. Be it reformist, anti-reformist, or indifferent to reform, realists intervened in the then contemporary world with the doctrine of realism and their realist subject matters were topical.

In his Preface to *American Realism: New Essay*, Eric J. Sundquist announces the uttermost truth of American realism:

No genre—if it can be called a genre—is more difficult to define than realism, and this is particularly true of American realism. In material it includes the sensational, the sentimental, the vulgar, the scientific, the outrageously comic, the desperately philosophical; in style it ranges from the exquisitely fine craft of James to the resonant

colloquial idioms of Twain to the blocklike profusions of Dreiser; in purpose it approaches the cultural essay, aspires to the utility of propaganda, seeks to dramatize the theater of social manners, cuts its own throat in deliberate parody. It is and does all these things—often at the same time. (vii)

Sundquist's *non*-definition of realism draws a vague yet vivid picture of this concept. It seems broad and inclusive on the one hand and narrow and exclusive on the other. It describes a version of realism that has been fully discussed, rationalized, amputated, re-assembled, discarded, and resuscitated by literary critics over decades. Critics who stipulate for a more pellucid definition resort to verisimilitude or mimesis, a faithful representation of the world. But it is the term of verisimilitude that causes critics to dismantle the perceptive realism because the standard of faithfulness is ontologically a polemic. Amanda Claybaugh even points out that realism has another more strict meaning by referring to “that nineteenth-century version of verisimilitude that named itself ‘realist’” (37). Like many literary terms, realism has “not one unified form...but many” (Morris 47). The form of realism submits to divergent national cultures and social forces at different historical moments. Thus the context within which a certain realist novel was written must be understood. When the term of realism was first used, it was loose rather than consistent and precise. Laden with “a history of aesthetic controversy” (Morris 47), realism does not aim at one particular group of people for its purpose of portrayal; but it does concentrate its aspiration on a special social stratus, middle class, as opposed to the aristocrats, especially in the British tradition.

According to Claybaugh, the British realist novel holds a distinctive application of realism from its French counterpart. The British novel embraces realism as “a homegrown tradition of verisimilitude” (Claybaugh 38). At the beginning of realist writing, the middle-class

reader would find that the characters of the novel are mostly ordinary people who are “often financially strapped, compulsively driven by desires for love (sex), power, or money” (Lehan 253), such as those in Jane Austin’s novels. The ordinary subject matters were later developed by Charles Dickens and his kind into a reformist one with focus on the lowlife. After the French reform of realism, the British novel mixed its verisimilitude with purposefulness and “the same mix would constitute realism in the United States” (Claybaugh 38). The history of British realism is similar to that of Asian American realism at this point.

If anything, Asian American realists do not distinguish their own writing from the mainstream WASP American realism; it is a facile job to find similarities between these two writing traditions. In their defense, Asian American realist writing put forth the racial concerns earlier than any non-literary Asian American national project of discourse establishment. American realism emerged in the late nineteenth century as a postbellum phenomenon in American literary history with William Dean Howells’ declaration of so-called Realism War<sup>3</sup> (Bell 1) and the antithesis to romanticism. Created in European literature, realism is by essence un-American because “the ‘thinness’ of American culture cannot nurture social fiction” (Kaplan 4), which explains why American realism cannot take realism as its own tradition as the British novel does. With this background, it is not unreasonable for Lisa Lowe to say that realist narrative is complicit with the hegemony of Western culture.

Asian American realism at its early stage does not produce a genuine model of the social forces at work. Jingqi Ling has explained the absence of certain Asian American realist works’ access to a whole spectrum of Asian American advocacy. Ling’s observation of the function of realism in Asian American narration is a development from Fredric Jameson’s accounts for the

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<sup>3</sup> The war between realism and romanticism occurred during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century led by Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain.

historicity that is specified to realists with different objective sources and possibilities in various historical moments. By comparing Balzac with Flaubert and Zola, Jameson negates the impression that some realists are more radical or actively involved in social revolution than others; how radical a realist novel is depends on “the possibility of access to the forces of change in a given moment of history” (*Marxism and Form* 204). At the time of Bulosan, such forces were mainly those of Asian exclusion policies and social reactions in American society. In the situation of Murayama, such forces were not significantly Asian exclusion in its narrow sense, but marginalization, racial oppression, interethnic antagonism, and most of all, feudal capitalism on Hawai’i plantations. During the era when Frank Chin dominated Asian American literature, model minorities have become a nationwide designation for Asian Americans. In the late 20th century, the age of Chang-rae Lee, children of post-1965 immigrants began to question their cultural identity as Americans, Asians, or Asian Americans; Asian American identity is understood as a phase as their self-identification; or some are agnostic towards a definition of their identity. Asian American realists like all the Western realists have experienced a pattern that suits their historical moments and social forces. Therefore, the form of realism itself is as unstable and inconsistent as any realist ideology.

René Wellek’s systematic study of the realism movement traces realism to its primitive ideal image: originated in the early nineteenth century, realism used to be simply a feature with no solid literary creed. But the monotonous modern criticism of realism judges it for its “excessive use of minute external detail, ... neglect of the ideal, and seeing the vaunted impersonality and objectivity as a cloak for cynicism and immorality” (Wellek 228-29). Based on Wellek’s revelation of the Western form of realism, Asian American realists have installed a different purpose in their adaptation of this form. For Asian American precursors of realism, it

was important to authorize and rectify information directly from the external world that comes into the national mind of America. They were considered either as “ambassadors of goodwill” by Elaine Kim (*Asian American Literature* 24) or assimilationists by more critical Asian American scholars like Lisa Lowe until Jingqi Ling gave them a more objective recognition as realists. Deducing from a flood of writing on realism, reality is the central theme of realism, though “[r]eality, like ‘truth,’ ‘nature,’ or ‘life,’ is, in art, in philosophy, and in everyday usage a value-charged word” (Wellek 224). Under the aegis of Ling’s account, assimilation can be understood as a phase of Asian American subject formation, a phase that could not be transcended by individuals who are confined to their historical specificities.

The historical limitation designates a negation of ambiguity in the Western realism. In realism, the fate of the characters should be sealed and the sealed meanings are delivered to the reader via narration. In the realistic mode of presentation, general truth can be told “through vehicle of the individual story, the individual plot” (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 200). It is also the wish of Asian American realists. In order to tell the truth, realism must present the social typicality and its destiny, which keeps the ongoing revolution within the social order itself. Jameson describes the internal contradictions of realism between its conviction to the presence and the social revolution as its covert political commitment and beholds an aesthetic need of realism “to avoid recognition of deep structural social change as such and of the deeper currents and contradictory tendencies within the social order” (“A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion” 263). However, it is such contradiction that spares realism from criticism of its complicity with the Western hegemony and urges realism to develop new genres, including the Bildungsroman. The evolution within realism is made necessary by its ontological nature, as Jameson describes,

The theorization of realism is a contradictory project, doomed, if not to failure, then at least to the constant branching off of paths that lead nowhere, all the while leaving a rich undergrowth of local detail in their wake. This is so, I believe, because realism is essentially an epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms. It is a contradiction which can, however, be reformulated in a productive way, as a tension to be solved and resolved over and over again, in a series of fresh innovations. (“A Note on Literary Realism in Conclusion” 261)

The ontological evolution of realism leads to the ascendancy of modernism in modern literary history. Modernism takes over the literary establishment of the West and wages a hegemonic power over the Western literary sensibilities in the battle of challenging “the ontological and epistemological premises of realism: it casts doubt on the very existence of any reality independent of human perception, and it questions whether individual perception can yield an understanding of the world that has more than subject validity” (Bader 177). But modernism by itself is not accurate enough to describe the literary situation of today, which explains why “in the overwhelming majority of modern novels, ... the ordinary criteria of realism still hold” (Williams, “Realism and the Contemporary Novel” 202; Eysteinnsson 181). In Asian American literature, modernism and realism become less distinctive whereas the distinguishing gesture between these two forms points to a significant presentation and position of the literary text in Asian American political and cultural landscapes.

For post-structuralist Asian American cultural critics such as Lisa Lowe, the unconventional forms of modernism and postmodernism ideologically manifest Asian American resistance against the Western hegemony. In Lowe’s reading of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s

*Dictee* (1982), the post/modernist aesthetic structure of the narrative interprets the subject formation of Asian Americans as a history of incoherence, fragmentation, and dislocation, which is contradictory to the uniformity projected in the South Korean national and historical narratives. The “recomposition of history” in the novel meanwhile critiques the “U.S. history of erasure of Korean people in national accounts” (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 112). The national narrative and ideology are altogether deconstructed in the heterodox, heteroglossic narration that grants it a post/modernist form. In post/modernism, moments of crisis and spaces of deviation are appreciated and juxtaposed with the disjointed, silent history of Asian American individuated experiences and collective articulation. This alternative form of narrative rejects the celebration of realist meaningfulness and purposefulness for the reason that the history of Asian America is a spectrum of alterity.

However, it is not difficult to descry that modernism as a form of interruption faces an Asian American conundrum. Modernism, like realism, has its phase and moment. For early Asian American novels that were written under Asian American essentialism and nationalism, the bewildering “referential function” of modernism that would enact “a crisis of the language, referentiality, and communication” from the modernist “structural properties” (Eysteinnsson 201) would be ineffective to pursue what the early Asian American ideology requested. The provocative unintelligibility of the modernist aesthetics, though passing a “historical judgment on intelligibility which has degenerated into misunderstanding” (qtd. in Eysteinnsson 203), does not convey a direct message of claiming America. For example, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975) upon being published, problematizes history and historical discourses on the one hand and is vulnerable as a modernist novel on the other—when it is evaluated by readers of the West as a truthful portrayal of the Asian/American experience and thus helps to confirm an

Orientalized image of China and Chinese Americans, it seems that the major readership, including those with trained eyes, cannot truly associate this Asian American novel with modernism because in school they are instructed with no background knowledge of Asian America and its subjects. The modernist “revolt against perceptual and ideological aesthesia” (Eysteinnsson 203) prompted a similar critique from Asian American essentialists such as Frank Chin for its “fake” presentation of the East and its purpose of pleasing the West by manipulating the Asian culture and image. Or, the decolonizing narrative in *Dictee* that produces no full descriptions of any history dismantles Asian American national project that often correlates literary narratives of the individual or the community with historical narratives of the U.S. Modernism at the early stage of Asian American Studies could not effectively convey an ideological message that answers the questions about Asian America to readers outside its territory.

A global movement of transnationalism in the forms of labor and capital at the turn of the century provides a flexible foundation for modern literary form practitioners, who have brought concerns to the complex, unanimous, and interdisciplinary nature of Asian American Studies. The cry for acknowledgement of Asian America’s modernity started with Lisa Lowe (1991) and Sau-ling Wong (1995), followed by Susan Koshy (1996). Wong denominates “denationalization” to the feature of such modernity and thus situates Asian America in a diasporic context, which results in the erasure of the borders of this imagined community, though she admits that *Asian America* “with no territorial sovereignty/integrity to underwrite it” suggests “a yearning for the kind of containing boundaries and contained site enjoyed by the dominant society, a nation-state” (“Denationalization Considered” 4). Wong further explicates that the demographic shifts of Asian America are occurring to not only the boundaries between Asia and America but also

those between Asian America and Asia. Increasing trans-Pacific cultural projects such as Ang Lee's films and even the director himself can be designated as both Asian and Asian American. Entry into America is more than "a one-way experiment in adaptation" (S. L. Wong, "Denationalization Considered" 7) and the Far East has come nearer to the West than ever in the history of the world. Despite her diasporic perspective and denationalizing perception, nonetheless, Wong retrogresses to the traditional nationalist framework by alerting the reader of decontextualization and blind celebration of bilingual literacy that would result in negation of the past and class stratifications. Consequently, Wong insists on "claiming America" as the essential core of Asian American Studies while *diaspora* should remain on the peripheries.

Koshy criticizes Wong's conservativeness and the misnomer of "denationalization" because the "false oppositions" between domestic and diasporic perspectives as the underpinning of Wong's argument are actually "interrelated affiliations" ("The Fiction of Asian America" 340-41). According to Koshy, the modernity of Asian America features transnationalism, the premises of which are the national boundaries and heterogeneity. Talking about heterogeneity, no one has offered a better theorization than Lisa Lowe. Her concepts of heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity grant a possibility for modernism in the twenty-first-century transnational Asian American domain. The uneven and unsynthetic power relations among Asian Americans and the incoherent self-identification of Asian American individuals in association with their cultural identity can be displayed in the fragmented, hesitant, uncongenial modernist narrative that singles out the personal voice rather than a collective formation. But it does not mean that modernism is all safe now in Asian American literature: because of the liberal, individuated subjectivity of literary modernism, a unified national consciousness in Asian American ideology

will become an auxiliary instead of a necessity. Modernism will likely turn Asian American literature into the *literature*, by which “Asian American” is simply accidental.

What distinguishes Asian American literature from the Eurocentric American literature is not its literary form. No matter what form it deploys, be it realism, modernism, or post-modernism, it does not by nature signify an ultimate resistance of Asian America against the Western hegemony in its cultural production because even in the form that is mostly confined to a Western tradition, there will be mavericks that challenge such a convention within the same form. Even modernism as a form that allows and forwards the breakdown of compliance to the foregoing or ongoing Western hegemony can be understood as an extension of such hegemony. Therefore, form can be used to examine the validity of the coherence between Asian American literature and Asian American criticism.

#### *VI. Formal Approach, Postformalist Denomination*

Even though I attempt to write the history of the subject of Asian American narrative that appears in the transition from realism to modernism, instead of dividing Asian American novels into these two forms, I will use three generic categorizations for the exigent naming purpose: survival, transformation, and contradiction. During the process, I am dealing with the form/ation of Asian American novels as an “internal” phenomenon of Asian American literary history at its fundamental level. There are no generic terms to cover all literary works. My argument is not conclusive either. Tzvetan Todorov asks if we have “demonstrated that all the particular products that take on the function of ‘literature’ possess common characteristics, which we can identify with legitimacy” (2); his answer is plainly negative. Todorov reminds his academic audience that literature is more likely to be studied for a functional purpose because a functional notion is

easier to be grasped than a structural one—the former defines what literature does while the latter asks what literature is. Asian American literary studies because of its interdisciplinary attribute continuously attempts to prove the function of literature rather than the structural entity of it. The purpose of this dissertation is still to tease out how the literary forms reflect the demographic changes of the Asian American identity politics and how Asian American narratives develop over time. However, to grapple with the forms or the structure of Asian American literature is the main concern of this project as well.

*Survival* at its face value refers to the surviving history of early Asian Americans. This history is paralleled with the development of Asian American realism. For the pre-1965 historical experiences of Asian Americans, survival is the mode of existence and realism is the form of writing practice. The term, “survival,” involves all the complexities of naming or categorizing Asian American literary works. It is sufficiently accurate and quotidian to describe the condition and dynamics of Asian American existence: the simple purpose of survival determines their maneuvers of living through America’s racial violence and inequality. In the literary terms, *survival* is not only physically informative of the living experience of early Asian migrants but also ideologically discursive of legitimizing Asian American resistance against social injustice through the most unembellished form of articulation. At this historical phase of Asian American literature, *survival* is very similar to Sau-ling Wong’s theorization of *necessity*. In order to survive, assimilation and claiming America are framed as the main theme of the early Asian American fictions. Entwined with resistance to the discursive oppression, the survival theme is compromised by an excursus of *ambiguity* that is usually absent in the classic Western realism. When ambiguity prevails, it suspends the supposedly closed circuit of meaning in Asian

American realism. This digressive component exposes an anxious trace of anti-hegemony in Asian American structuralist mimesis of realism.

*Transformation* maintains and develops the realist form of Asian American literature, but the content is modified. Compared with the survival fiction, the transformation kind mirrors more features of the traditional Western form of realism, which with a reference to the everyday, ordinary life in contrast to the heroic, romantic or legendary subjects that take up Romanticism is normally associated with the rising middle class. This phase of Asian American novels pays a particular current of attention to the available assimilated, middle-class Asian Americans, or model minorities. In the transformation fiction joined by the inheritance from the ancestral Asian American experiences of survival, the characters live up to the ordinary bourgeois view of the world. Still with a concentration on contemporary themes, celebrations of assimilation in many ways are more common in transformation novels. The old ideology of Asian Americanism is challenged with *hesitance* in this type of fiction, and even altered: “claiming America” still decides its ideology, but “being (Asian) American” redeems what is otherwise a survival theme. In wide variations of consideration of its identity, the Asian American protagonist in transformation novels is first of all American and the product of the Asian American nationalist enlightenment that disclaims connections to Asia or transfers Asianness to Americanness. The phase of transformation is in itself transformative. It negotiates with the old Asian American ideology and collectivity. A particular apprehension of the relationship between Asian American individuated subjects and the larger community and society begins to form. The interference of individuality in the transformation fiction anticipates the disruption of modernism.

The contradiction between individuals and communities that surfaced in transformation novels is intensified in the *contradiction* fiction. The early Asian American ideology ceases to

function sufficiently and effectively when transnationalism offers an alternative possibility other than a closure in the national scope of meanings. Asian American literature becomes lively as literature, rather than a social and historical commitment that carries a promise to the consciousness of pan-Asian American collectivity. Contradiction is free to appear in every aspect of an Asian American individual's life. Subjectivity is appreciated and emphasized and consequently dramatizes the contradiction. The contradiction between the social novel and the personal novel in the late twentieth century further connects Asian American literary form to the Western civilization that celebrates or divulges humanity. The tenor is sometimes even diverted from the Asian American objectivity and subjectivity, and placed upon "the finding and materialization of a formula about *society*" at large (Williams, "Realism and the Contemporary Novel" 205; emphasis mine). Feelings as independent human beings rather than Asian Americans or Asians or Americans are abstracted from the sum of social experience and can be shared outside the Asian American fief. The society is not necessarily vile while apathy is appropriate to describe the Asian American protagonist. Modernism is enabled by freedom to write the self's own voice in contradiction novels; sometimes it is not even Asian American. It is perhaps in such contradiction and the form of modernism that Asian America disappears and literature succeeds.

### *VII. The Structure of Analysis*

I confess that the structure of this dissertation seems too convenient. It is divided into three chapters, based on my categorization of Asian American fictions: survival, transformation, and contradiction. With such a distinct categorization for each chapter, I install literary theories of realism, Bildungsroman, and modernism as the frameworks for each categorization. Given the

scope of the literature in question, each chapter begins with a debate and introduces a range of texts that bear upon this debate. Aiming to systematize Asian American fictions across a range of cultures, ethnicities, and aesthetic forms, the body of selected texts is entitled to heterogeneity. One important issue is the concept of Asian American literature itself: while its legitimacy has been historicized and interrogated by various Asian Americanists—Colleen Lye once said that there are Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean American writers, but not Asian American (“Racial Form” 96), this term continues to be used in its problematic and narrow definition. I may not be able to present the whys and wherefores in a comprehensive manner for the reason that this dissertation is projected on form. However, the study of form itself has self-proven to be necessarily comparative—after all, the literary forms have a significant history long before any Asian American discourses.

Chapter one looks into Asian American fiction at its early stage, which mostly features realist components. But realism is not all. Examining two pioneering novels, *America Is in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan and *All I Asking for Is My Body* by Milton Murayama, I aspire to answering the forming questions as to why realism is necessary for the early stage of Asian American novels and how realism and its sub-forms are associated with the theme of survival. Both Bulosan and Murayama adopt realism as their narrative form, but they emphasize differing facets of it. Bulosan’s work is contradictory in its own form of narration: whether it is an autobiography or a fiction decides what reading strategy should be used and how well founded the reading practice will be. As a matter of fact, this novel has been acknowledged and taught as both fiction and historiographical documentation by Asian Americanists of various fields<sup>4</sup>. In questioning the historians’ attempts to read *America Is in the Heart* as historical documentation,

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<sup>4</sup> Though Asian American studies are interdisciplinary, it is commonplace that most Asian Americanists are still discipline-based and thus confined to their disciplinary narrativity.

I am not trying to make a historical argument in a general sense. The reason is threefold. Firstly, my readings of the selected literary text and its critiques do not draw on the secondary literature of the period. Secondly, historians would demand more lucid prose and facts whereas my interpretations are inclined towards criticism, of which the factuality is impossible to testify by simply relying on the actuality of Asian American history. In addition, historical arguments are usually conclusive; but my intention is to better understand how literary forms are reflective of the racial form of Asian America and to sanction dissonance within Asian America. This rationale serves my readings of the other novels in this dissertation. Another major assumption of my argument is that *America Is in the Heart* is always read as a semi-autobiographical fiction. By examining the currently available applications of literary forms to this novel, which involve semi-autobiography, Bildungsroman, naturalism, critical realism, and socialist realism, I argue that socialist realism is in fact the most fundamental form of Bulosan's work, which is reflected by its ideological implication and manipulation; but the conflation of these forms in this book satiates and repeats the purpose of survival, a historical phase when most writers were still looking for a mode of re/presentation and found imitation of Western literary forms approachable without being able to question the ideological finitude of these forms.

An interpolative moment in realism caused by the use of satire appears in *All I Asking for Is My Body*, which occupies the last section of chapter one. The interference of satire invites ambiguity to Asian American survival fictions. The literary form of this novel is not a problem: the realistic mode is quite obviously self-proven through Murayama's photographic depictions of the Japanese Americans' lives on the Hawaiian plantation. However, realist conclusiveness is tempered by Murayama's implication of satire. The realistic portrayal of the Hawaiian plantation in the novel is swamped with the author's satire on the Oyama family and the "diluted" Japanese

value they represent. The association of satire with realism is not a literary mistake; but it does marshal interpretations to a reductive argument that the main conflict in the novel is between the issei and the nisei: since the issei stand for the Japanese tradition and the nisei typify American individuality and freedom, the generational conflict is thus conveniently equalized to the conflict between Asian values and American values. Once satire is concerned in my reading of the novel, it becomes clear that the conclusion is not as simple as the readers would expect. Satire is used “as an indirect attack on historical particulars” and suggests “a general state of confusion or chaos” (Knight 13). *All I Asking* seems to lack a particularly clear target of criticism; the fact is that it has many targets that the reader may not be able to connect the dots<sup>5</sup>. Satire probably has attenuated the critical power of social realism in the novel; but it encourages inquiry and provocation to the very systematic formation of knowledge and the corollary of institutionalized racial and class stratification. The satiric activities can reasonably explain the criticism the novel tries to convey.

Chapter two explores a coming-of-age phenomenon of Asian American literature that points to fiction of transformation, which becomes common to most post-1965 Asian American writings. A new social reality both outside and inside of Asian America had spawned a new literary practice. Alongside the emergence of model minorities, Asian American literature has changed its subject matters from a single perspective to more complex multi-angles. Racial stratification, though still dominating Asian American literary subject matters, has taken up different forms of presentations. In this chapter, I come to terms with “transformation” through an ontological examination of the Bildungsroman sub-genre: it is easy to connect these two concepts in that transformation is part of the subject formation process—the decisive

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<sup>5</sup> When I was teaching this novel in my class in 2011, my students found it difficult to connect the first part to the rest of the book. Though the novella is consistent with its characters, the sub-plots are unhitched.

characteristic of the Bildungsroman. However, on the other hand, because the *raison d'être* of *transformation* is designated to the exclusiveness and limitation of the classic Bildungsroman, my investigations in two novels, *Donald Duk* by Frank Chin and *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee, endeavor to distinguish the Bildungsroman from transformation; to showcase the modified educational activities of Asian American subject formation; and to emphasize the complexity of Asian American subject formation in this phase of Asian American literary history. At the close of my examination, I propound that transformation does not necessarily lead to a successful Bildung and vice versa, such as in *Donald Duk*, whereas *Native Speaker* exemplifies the complexity of Asian American subject formation and signals a divergence from the classic Bildungsroman. This rationalizes the naming of “transformation” to this type of Asian American fiction.

By introducing modernism to Asian American literary theory, chapter three with its focus on contradiction fictions tends to tease out the potential of literature that yields more possibilities for Asian American studies. Two novels will be discussed in this chapter, Han Ong's *Fixer Chao* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Prior to the analyses of the selected works, I will present a literature review of modernism in contrast to realism. This chapter identifies the ways Asian American modernity comes into being. Analyses are about to be focused on the inherent modernity of Asian America and proposals will be made that though modernism deals with individuated subjects' increasing consciousness of the fragmented world in the late-capitalist era, it bestows on Asian American writers creative liberty. The chosen texts work and rework this Western literary trend. The concepts of ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity put forth by post-colonial theory are emphasized in Asian American modernist fiction. The intense interactions between Asian Americanism, postcolonialism, and cosmopolitanism are carefully treated in these

modernist or semi-modernist fictions with a full awareness of institutionalized Asian American discourses. Asian Americans' subjectivity in contradiction novels is negotiated with other paradigms that define the modern phenomenon of America and Asian America, and sometimes go beyond the racial sphere. Published in the first decade of the new millennium, Ong's *Fixer Chao* and Lahiri's *The Namesake* challenge a traditional, nationalist reading practice that prevails in Asian American literary studies: both present self-alienated, fragmented personas and show little effort in addressing victimized collectivity and individuals. The former not only is imbued with personal narrative that does not necessarily couch racial awareness but also ruthlessly displays a division within Asian America. Identity in *Fixer Chao* becomes a purposeful blur that tries to elude any recognition. *The Namesake* is evidently a typical Asian American<sup>6</sup> novel on identity. However, it delivers no certain questions, answers, or criticism concerning identity. This ambivalence renders a possible modernist reading of the novel.

This literary dimension of form, which appeared in the works of many prominent and legendary Western literary critics, almost reached a dead end in the existential project of Asian American studies as it originated in the color-blind territory of literary criticism. Asian American critics who have written some of the most perceptive pages on form, implicitly or explicitly, directly or indirectly, will probably find the topic of form unnecessary or even treacherous. But my concern is that when we negate the significance of form and supersede form with content, we will fall into a negation that everything white or color-blind is not suitable for Asian American literature. But my question is: how colored are Asian American novels now? When we define Asian American novels with a definite "color," are we depriving many Asian migrants, diasporas,

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<sup>6</sup> Considering that Lahiri regards herself a diasporic subject, it may not be prudent to make such a judgment. However, the main characters in the novel are undoubtedly nationally American. The book is also published in Bengali from Kolkata, India. The diasporic features do not fundamentally interrupt its Asian American attributes. The debate on Lahiri's national and cultural identity will be advanced later in chapter three.

or transnationals of the equity of recognition? Aren't we too close to "the process of negative totalization" (de Man 35) when Asians in the United States are not just Americans? Are there borders of the imagined communities of Asian America? I hope I can find the answers via close readings of the chosen texts.

## Chapter One

## Survival Fiction: Realism, Satire, and Ambiguity as Means of Survival

*I. A Personal Correspondence*

Published in 1974 and 1991 respectively, the landmark anthologies of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* and *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, co-edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, have been fairly acknowledged by a majority of Asian American critics, who appraise the historical significance of these two anthologies in Asian American enlightenment project. Sau-ling Wong announces that “[i]t was Frank Chin and his associates who, in their prefatory essays affirming cultural dynamism, set forth most of the terms of debate on what counts as Chinese American literature...[T]hey represent the first clear articulation of the possibilities of a Chinese American literary identity” (“Chinese American Literature” 40). Lisa Lowe evaluates the editors of *Aiiieeeee!* for having “clearly historicized their definitions as products of particular moments of Asian American cultural definition... to represent the tradition, ... to thematize the possibility of shifts, revisions, and different formations, [and] to account for the heterogeneous and uneven development of the various groups that make up the Asian American community” (*Immigrant Acts* 43-44). In the editors’ own notification, *Aiiieeeee!* helped the Eurocentric American publishing industry recognize “the presence of an Asian American cultural tradition that is not mere mimicry or exotic artifact” (Chin and Wong viii; E. Kim, *Asian American Literature* 174). The acceptance of these two anthologies in and out of the imaginary Asian America, in a word, demonstrates its status in Asian American literary history by defining Asian American cultural identity,

legitimizing Asian American literature, and denouncing its absence from American national discourses.

But along the way the controversies around these very first anthologies of Asian American literature have appealed for more attention. King-Kok Cheung arraigned the *Aiiieeee!*'s editors of sexists "for their preoccupation with reasserting Asian American manhood, their classification of desirable attributes as masculine, and Chin's blistering attack on Kingston" (*An Interethnic Companion* 10-11). Cheung further charges that *The Big Aiiieeee!* snipes at certain estimable Chinese American writers, including Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan, who, according to the editors, "are the first writers of any race...to so boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history" (J. Chan et al. 3) and complicit with the white publishing industry that takes interest in distorting Asian legends and images. Cheung is not alone in such criticism. Elaine Kim has accounted for Frank Chin's protest against the aforementioned writers' feminization of Asian American cultural identity and meanwhile she trumpeted the legitimacy of positioning Asian American womanhood in the construction project of Asian American national discourses. Other Asian American feminists including Shirley Lim, Amy Ling, Lisa Lowe, et al., while justifying the contributions of the co-editors of the two anthologies, point out that they blot out gender in their definition of Asian American nationalism (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 76). When the sequel, *The Big Aiiieeee!*, came out in 1991, Glenn Masuchika has criticized a "highly biased, very uneven" paroxysm expressed in this anthology because "[m]aterials in this anthology were chosen for their 'political correctness' and not for their literary values" and thus this anthology is not recommendable (96).

However, an interview by Jeffrey Partridge with Shawn Wong tells a different story about theorizing these two books and reveals the editors' initial comprehension of these two anthologies. Wong does not explain the sexist bias in these two anthologies; neither does he defend their methodology of categorizing Asian American writers as "real" or "fake." But he admits that they have left out the first generation just out of their own ignorance (Partridge 97) and instead of intending to "define the literary canon in Asian American literature" (94), their goal was as simple as to call for notice and to amplify Asian American literature rather than criticize Asian American writers<sup>1</sup>. Wong explains that *Aiiiiiiiii!* was published "in a trade edition and not a textbook" and characterizes this anthology as "a personal correspondence" (Partridge 101 n7) because it utters a personal voice based on individual interests, instead of taking a set-up standard of evaluation with filtered comprehension of the social phenomena of Asian America.

## *II. Writing of Survival*

Wong's designation of a "personal correspondence" to *Aiiiiiiiii!* and *The Big Aiiiiiiiii!* articulates the strategy of Asian American civilization to survive the national negligence of the racial Others. With varying façades, the nature of such a personal correspondence prevails among the immigrant-generation and even the second-generation Asian American writers. Many critics have studied this phenomenon but named such writing practice of survival in different ways.

The editors of the aforementioned anthologies fail to include immigrant-generation writers, who are embraced in Elaine Kim's attempt to develop Asian American anthologies from

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Chin might have considered their activity of compiling these two anthologies as a national agenda. However, these two anthologies are more of a survival strategy than a critical methodology.

a “personal correspondence” into a systematic discourse. Based on her investigation into first-generation Asian American writers, Elaine Kim identifies them as “ambassadors of goodwill” (*Asian American Literature* 24). This identification refers to “foreign students, scholars, and diplomats, who were, together merchants, exempted from the Asian exclusion laws and who generally received better treatment in America than did Asian laboring people, [and who] comprise a disproportionately large part of the early Asian American literary voice” (24). To illustrate her comprehension of the *goodwill* motif of this generation, Kim presents a polemic combination of writers, taking Etsu Sugimoto, Lin Yutang, Wu Tingfang, Younghill Kang, and Carlos Bulosan as examples. By “goodwill,” she acknowledges these writers’ disposition of pleasing the mainstream European American audience and looking forward to their acceptance<sup>2</sup> because of their privileged class as readers. Hence, these writers, instead of portraying their struggles for survival, focus their explanation of the East to the West on high culture and civilization, and their lividity at the U.S race politics was “tentative and apologetic” (25).

Kim’s work is significant in examining early Asian American literature for being one of the first full-length studies on this subject. But she confuses Asian American writing with Asian literature and this conflation is exemplified in her inclusion of Lin Yutang (1895-1976). The fact that Lin published some books in English does not automatically lead to the conclusion that he was Asian American. Having achieved his master degree at Harvard, and worked at the UN and Columbia University, he spent most of his life in China and Taiwan. His devotion to building a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures has made him a literary, cultural ambassador. Though early immigrants in American history were deprived of naturalization<sup>3</sup>, such history of disenfranchisement is not the reason why Lin was not American. Never claiming America, Lin

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<sup>2</sup> I disagree with her on her inclusion of Carlos Bulosan in this “goodwill” category. My discussion of Bulosan will be further presented in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Japanese were not eligible for naturalization until 1952 (Petersen 21).

Yutang did not attempt to abandon his Chinese citizenship or question his state of being in America. In other words, he experienced no *struggle of becoming* Asian American<sup>4</sup>. To become “Asian American,” one must experience social denial in various forms and engage oneself in constructing Asian American identity; Asian Americans are defined by histories. They are what they do in America. The cultural identity of Asian Americans is historically and socially constructed.

In addition, Kim’s faulty definition of Asian American literature, which is “literature written in English about the American experience by writers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent” (*Asian American Literature* 285), is—though focused (A. Ling 89)—way too broad to be legitimate as a definition. At first sight, her definition does not contradict her inclusion of Lin Yutang. However, the content of Asian American literature, according to Kim, should be “the main experience shared by Asians in America,” the experience of “struggle against racism and racial stereotyping” (A. Ling 89). This experience is obviously not shared in Lin’s writing, especially in his renowned book, *My Country and My People* (1935), which consists of “superficial, pithy pieces about China that are in perfect keeping with the American popular view” (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 28). The editors of *Aiiiiieee!* as well have warned the Asian American readers that Lin wrote from a white supremacist perspective, which partially stems from his sense of security and intimacy with his “Chinese cultural identity in an experimental sense” (Chin xiv-v)<sup>5</sup>. Lin’s writing therefore is not an Asian American cultural

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<sup>4</sup> It will be disruptive of the cultural identification of Asian America to simply define Asian Americans as Americans of Asian descent because in history, Asian descents have been denied rights of naturalization. Therefore, I emphasize the construction of the Asian American identity, instead of the consequence of achieving an identity that is legitimately affixed to “America.”

<sup>5</sup> The designation of “white supremacist” implies that *Aiiiiieee!* editors regard the Americanized Chinese writers such as Lin Yutang and C. Y. Lee as Chinese Americans who became “American by choice” as these writers “consciously set out to become American, in the white sense of the word, and succeeded in becoming ‘Chinese American’ in the stereotypical sense of the good, loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding, cultured sense of the word. It is no surprise that their writing is from whiteness, not from Chinese America. Becoming white supremacist was part

production. Kim's own understanding of Asian American identity and cultural production provokes debate even within itself.

Despite my dissension with Kim's definition of Asian American writers and her misnomer for early Asian American writers as "ambassadors of goodwill," I conceive of her conflation of these writers' cultural identities as exemplifying the Asian American form of survival. Kim's act of initiating the subject of Asian American literature by integrating "goodwill" writers accrues with ambiguity or (pretentious or obstinate) optimism that imbues early immigrant literature by writers of Asian descent. Such ambiguity is embedded in Kim's definition of Asian American literature, in which her emphasis on the language of publication and "the American experience" (*Asian American Literature* 285) can be easily disputed. To mention one conspicuous case, Ha Jin's first few novels and novella, *In the Pond* (1998), *Waiting* (1999), *The Crazy* (2002), and *War Trash* (2004), are all produced and published in English while the contents fictionalize his experience in China<sup>6</sup>. As a first-generation immigrant Asian American writer, Ha Jin in his early works worries not all about the so-called American experience. This ambiguity in Kim's register of Asian American literature features fortuitousness rather than meticulousness, simplicity not complexity. Though Kim admits the problematality of her definition and expresses her wish of broadening this definition by incorporating writings in Asian languages (xi), her stress on the *product* rather than the *production* of Asian American identity is already in question. The validity of interpreting identity as a product has been questioned by Stuart Hall.

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of their consciously and voluntarily becoming 'American.'... They come from a white tradition of Chinese writing about America for the entertainment of Americans" (xiv-v). However, Chinese scholars conceive of Lin Yutang and Chin Yang Lee in different manners; the former was Chinese while the latter was Chinese American. Though Lin has published books in English and pursued his graduate studies in Comparative Literature at Harvard University and in Chinese at the University of Leipzig in Germany, he never claimed America and most of his books were published in Chinese and are about China. For these reasons, to Asian Americanize Lin and accuse him of being a white supremacist is a thorny argument.

<sup>6</sup> To credit Kim, Ha Jin's works came after the publication of Kim's book.

Defining “cultural identity” as a production rather than a product of social circumstances, Hall offers two different ways so as to avoid any partiality. There is truly common sense of “cultural identity” as “the idea of one, shared culture” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 211), a collective recognition of the self. The underlying oneness of this self-perception desires to be presented and visualized through its consensual unifying power, which leads to Hall’s argument that there is a second position of perceiving cultural identity. By recognizing that “there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’: or rather—since history has intervened—‘what we have become’” (212), Hall directs the reader to historicization of the concept of the self, or the subject formation; in this sense, cultural identity is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (212), which bares the current moment and the historical traces of cultural identity. The historically mutual exclusion within the term of *Asian America/n* is internal to the dominant societal identification of Asian America. Emphasis on either part of this conception merely beholds Asian America as a uniform, steady result of cultural formation and underscores the fragmentation that is normalized by the “dominant regimes of representation” (213). In contrast, to think of *Asian America/n* as a *production* is to mind the historical process of *becoming* and constructing Asian America, and to address the fluidity of the identity construction of Asian Americans.

But it is unfair to blame Kim for her homogeneous designation of Asian American literature; after all, Asian American criticism did not surface prior to the 1980s. Therefore, following Elaine Kim, when Sau-ling C. Wong published her monograph a decade later, she proposes a more focused and punctilious description of the conception of Asian America and its literary and cultural studies. Wong ascribes her study to a consistent collective engagement of Asian American scholars in institutionalizing Asian American studies for the past decade.

Having witnessed debate over the problematic definition of Asian American identity/identification<sup>7</sup> among Asian Americanists, Wong indicates no explicit definition of this concept. Rather, she enquires how to read Asian American literature, proceeds by a detour around the complexity of the term of *Asian American*, and accentuates the importance of contextuality and intertextuality of the meanings of Asian American texts. While contextuality addresses the substantiality of historical literacy in any text reading, intertextuality “has a poststructuralist genealogy...which regards ‘any text’ to be ‘constructed as a mosaic of quotations’ and ‘the absorption and transformation of another’” (Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*<sup>10</sup>). Wong intends to explore intertextuality by investigating the allusion of Asian American literary works to Asian classics or folklore, for which Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* serves as a dedicated example. However, for the reason that allusion is rarely adopted in the two novels I am about to discuss in this chapter, I will focus on Wong’s conception of contextuality, accounting for the sociopolitical and historical backgrounds of Asian American literature. In her study of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, which clearly presents the history of Japanese internment in Canada and incorporates actual historical documentation as an integral part of the text, Wong considers the historical context of *Obasan* as necessary and internal as the story itself. Though the historical context is always regarded by Euro-American literary critics as the extratextual backdrop of fiction, the organic structure of *Obasan* demonstrates that Asian Canadian and American literatures must be read alongside its historical knowledge as intrinsic as the plot itself. The integration of the historical context in Asian American fiction is rendered indispensable due to the common reader’s lack of knowledge of Asian American history and culture. The marginalization and alienation of Asian American

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<sup>7</sup> Wong poses this question, “Does the study of a marginalized literature require membership in the given group, participation in appropriately typical historical experience, ‘insider’ cultural knowledge, and a group-specific methodology?” (4)

culture and history in Eurocentric American national education project rationalizes the survival project of Asian American civilization that features a presentation of its historical context.

Contextuality therefore serves the theme of survival.

The *raison d'être* of the survival motif in Asian American literary history, where the autobiographical genre used to lead, can be simplified, if not reduced, to the theme of Necessity in Wong's book. In contrast to *Extravagance*, Wong associates the concept of Necessity<sup>8</sup> with "force, demand, or constraint" (*Reading Asian American Literature* 13). The self-justifying, serious "business of survival," as Wong adumbrates, is not defined by starvation or destitution, but by the mentality that lacks of consciousness of racial and class exploitation (44). Wong elucidates this criterion of designating the description of "survival" to early Asian American literature in her interpretation of *Obasan*:

[T]he definition of "survival" can be quite elastic.... When pursuing the interests of survival, members of the immigrant generation are self-absorbed and single-minded, indifferent to their reception by whites. Such indifference is part of the overall desensitization to the environment that enables them to be good providers. Yet it tends to rankle the American-born, who, because of their somewhat easier life, often find the elders' caution claustrophobic and white society's promise of acceptance alluring. They want to be able to enjoy the good life that they see around them. However, treats do not

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<sup>8</sup> Prior to the publication of *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993), Wong has "confessed" that she borrowed these two topical catchphrases—Necessity and Extravagance—from Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, *The Woman Warrior*, where the narrator compares her mother with her father's sister, who commits suicide for getting pregnant with a man other than her husband. She is expunged from the family history and thus becomes a "No Name Woman." Upon her daughter's request for an explanation about the aunt's suicide, the mother, who embodies Necessity, tells her daughter the useful parts and "will add nothing unless powered by Necessity" (Kingston 6). In a time when "the village needed food," "[a]dultery is extravagance," as sex is useless and a private life is dangerous (Kingston 13, 6). Therefore, Wong identifies Necessity with "social responsibility" and Extravagance with "self-actualization" ("Necessity and Extravagance" 5).

come cheap: sometimes the American-born find themselves selling their birthright for a mess of pottage. (44)

According to Wong, psychological survival is riveted to humiliation and pain, the experiences of which are common to individual and collective Asian American subjects. History of racial stratification tattooed the collective memory with physical starvation for sensitivity, compassion, and imagination (29). Material success and social achievements cannot undo this effect in a short time. Necessity or desire to survive a long history of starvation, alienation, marginalization, disenfranchisement, displacement, restrictions, in addition to violence, obscures and even diminishes Asian Americans' individual feelings and thus the Asian American subject becomes depersonalized. Asian America's history of survival is accordingly one of dehumanization.

The survival-minded generation in Wong's harsh criticism refers to the American-born or the second-generation Asian American writers while Kim's target is the immigrant generation. The dismissal of other generations in their criticism seems to discredit their arguments about survival and leaves their arguments incomplete. The collective and individual struggles for survival will be wherefore endangered and reduced to generational conflicts. Furthermore, Wong's emphasis on the indispensability of sociopolitical contexts of Asian American literature generates a line of inquiry: Does the history of survival parallel the novels of survival in the current paradigms of Asian American studies? How does Asian American literature involve history as an integrated entity?

### *III. Survival History vs. Survival Fiction*

If literature has the same function as history for the sake of reality and visibility, what makes literature necessary and significant in Asian American studies? If literature has to adopt

the form of historical or sociological documentation in order to display a whole truth and fetch political correctness, it will fall into a dilemma between its attribute of fictionality and its social burden of delivering the truth. The reason that literature is not history and has to be differentiated from history is that literature opens to a myriad of articulations that are internally conflicted but pursue a negotiation between the micro sphere of human sufferings and the macro context of history, the former of which cannot be sanctioned through the rigid, objective, and emotionless languages and approaches of history and sociology. The gap between literature and social sciences, even though they share the same theme of *survival*, is nevertheless legitimate in that literature can employ varying forms, through which the dominative narrative and its antagonist can coexist and such coexistence empowers the reader to dredge up the ideological advocacy or resistance. This is the beauty of literature; so is the danger of literature. However, the gap between literature and history does not make the fiction less real because it is not a breach between truthful and faulty presentations, or between faithful or disloyal affiliations; it is a split between the macro and micro spheres, where ellipses are necessary and allowed to interrupt the plausible coherence but still maintain consistent disciplinary discourses and meanwhile sustain a capability to be completed with each other's assistance. In other words, this split of presentations and representations enables compensation rather than destruction, completion instead of fragmentation. The theme of survival in the discipline of history is a paradigm of recording, which demands accuracy, the bigger-picture display, and a unified ideological purpose for comprehension and visualization. The motif of survival in literature at certain times unlearns the historiographical formation; it is open to conflicting ideologies and displays Asian American experience as a process, not a destination. The nature of literature endows the historical experience of survival with open-mindedness and ability to depict the inner world of Asian

American individuated subjects. It reminds the viewer of such experience that culture is shaped by “the contradictions...not by the unities and harmonies of our culture” (Chase 1).

To exemplify the gap between survival history and survival fiction, I will use the Japanese and Filipino historical experiences in America for example in accordance with the selected novels of survival, Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* and Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body*.

Compared with other Asian migrant laborers in America, the Filipinos had their advantages: being classified as American nationals allowed them unrestricted entry into the United States. The influx of Filipino laborers followed Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Asian Indians as a corollary of the labor shortage caused by exclusion of the other Asian ethnic laborers (Takaki, *Views from a Different Shore* 318). Seduced by the false promises of the reports that selectively recorded economic success of Filipino laborers in America, the Pinoys<sup>9</sup>, who were largely under the influence of Spanish conservatism, were additionally pulled to America by the propaganda of American democracy and “liberalism of social relations”(Lasker 325-26). Unlike the other racialized Asian laborers, the moment they arrived in the United States the Filipinos encountered economic competition with white laborers and became the target of racial violence, which had been a residual backlash towards Asian migrant laborers for decades before the arrival of the Pinoys. Annexed to the U.S., identified as “little brown brothers” by the American government (Takaki, *Views from a Different Shore* 324) and brought up in American schools, the Filipinos considered themselves as social equals to others, “whether old-stock American, immigrant Caucasian, Japanese or Mexican” (Lasker 330) and as Americans born under the same flag. However, the subjects of the Philippines were still treated by the American government as

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<sup>9</sup> The Filipinos refer to themselves as Pinoys. It is first used by Carlos Bulosan in *America Is in the Heart*, when Claro tells Carlos that “The Pinoys work every day in the fields but when the season is over their money is in the Chinese vaults!” (118).

foreigners and the Filipinos in the Continental United States were still discussed as *migrants*. Sharing the same belief in white supremacy, American imperialism and expansionism in Asia were modified into exclusionism at home (Takaki, *Views from a Different Shore* 324). American expansionists, while searching for external labor to relieve the pressure caused by the labor shortage during the U.S. industrialist and capitalist development, perpetuated and institutionalized racial discrimination both inside and outside of the United States. A nationwide condemnation was drawn upon the Filipino laborers, who were excoriated as troublemakers, criminals, and sexual predators for two fundamental reasons. For one thing, familiar with the Western culture and speaking English, Filipinos were more able to date and even marry white women, though forbidden by the law. For another, lack of a strong adult group, made up of young men around thirty with no women, Filipinos had to look for female companionship from outside of the Filipino communities. Their pursuit of white women was reckoned a threat to white racial purity. Whereas the other Asian ethnic laborers were accused of unassimilability and self-alienation, Filipinos' assimilation was simply undesirable, as is explained by Bruno Lasker:

[S]peaking the English language, predisposed by his schooling in the Philippine Islands for a love of America and all its traditions and customs, anxious to acquire the skills and knowledge which America has to offer and to mix socially with Americans, the more educated Filipino is, if anything, *too* assimilable to accept the limitations imposed upon him by public opinion; and the problem which he creates is not that of the stranger who cannot be Americanized, but rather that of the would-be American who refuses to remain a stranger. (331)

As a novel of survival, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* vividly portrays the Filipinos' immediate experience of suffering in the United States. This semi-autobiography wonderfully illustrates the interdisciplinary gist of Asian American studies. Despite its historical inaccuracy, Bulosan's work has been read as a novel as well as historical documentation and thus it blurs the formalistic boundary between fiction and history. Historians who read it as a historical contribution, nonetheless, criticize that several aspects addressed in the book contradict the historical observations of the Filipino community in the mainland United States. For instance, Bruno Lasker finds that due to the fact that the economic competition between the Filipino American laborers and their European counterparts was confined to "wage-earning occupations of the lowest paid kinds" (329), which were often engaged by women and other immigrants groups, these groups of cheap labor were "more hard hit than American-born men" (329). Bulosan's writing, however, is obviously in favor of the aforementioned groups and, by calling them "Great Americans" (188), endows these people with the hope for American democracy and freedom. Moreover, while *America Is in the Heart* faithfully depicts violence inflicted upon the Filipinos, it also truthfully displays the lowlife Filipino laborers: fighting, gambling and promiscuity prevail so adamantly in the Filipino community that Carlos the protagonist prays, "Please, God. Don't change me in America!" (126). All these depictions are in contradiction with one another; as a result, Bulosan fails to demonstrate a consistent political vantage point. As the readers, how do we understand these contradictions? How do we understand the interracial and intraracial conflicts articulated by Bulosan? The most fundamental questions are: how do we read this book? As historical documentation of which the accuracy and effectuality should be guaranteed and statistically proved or as a fictionalized personal and collective experience that

invites sundry interpretations? What is the difference between these two disciplinarily differentiated reading practices? What is the significance of differentiating them?

The unique controversy over the form of *America Is in the Heart* signifies its categorization as survival fiction. But Milton Murayama's novel, *All I Asking for Is My Body*, never received any hassles concerning its genre. While Bulosan's writing is questioned for its historical accuracy, Murayama's realistic, pictorial depictions of the Japanese Hawaiians exemplify more conflation of the ideologies investigated in Asian American studies. In order to understand the correlation—the differences and connections—between survival history and survival novels, one needs to be familiarized with such historical knowledge. Gary Okihiro's *Cane Fires* fulfills this requirement by chronicling the issei and nisei Japanese laborers' survival of anti-Japanese movements in pre-WWII Hawaii. Two events that pertain to Murayama's novel in particular grab my interest. The first historical account is the 1920 strike organized by Japanese and Filipino sugar plantation workers. Okihiro highly praises this strike as

a milestone in Hawaiian labor history because of the numbers of workers involved, the length of the strike, the participation of two ethnic groups in a single work action, and the nature of the strikers' demands. Moreover, the strike was historically significant because of the way in which it was interpreted by Hawaii's planters, the territorial government, and the military, leading to far-reaching consequences for Hawaii's Japanese. (*Cane Fires* 66)

With this evaluation in hand, however, Okihiro also documents that the failure of this strike resulted from HSPA's<sup>10</sup> bribery of Pablo Manlapit, leader of the Filipino Labor Union (*Cane Fires* 71). What is more intriguing is that Murayama in his famous novel, *All I Asking for Is My*

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<sup>10</sup> Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) was one of Hawaii's white elite sections (Kauanui 71).

*Body*, which intensely portrays the plantation life of the first and second generations of Japanese laborers before WWII, does not record this strike or simply dismisses it through Father Oyama. When the eldest son of the Oyamas, Toshio, questions his father and the whole Japanese community on the plantation for their sabotage of the 1937 Filipino strike, Father Oyama replies with indifference, “we went on strike in 1920 and 1922 and both times the others were the strikebreakers” (Murayama 36). Throughout the novel, the separation between Japanese and Filipino groups remains intact and even unchallenged by the Japanese collective in the novel.

In addition, Okihiro’s documentation examines the rumor that the Japanese government strategically planned to take over Hawaii through its emigrant subjects. In defiance of the 1920 strike leaders’ protestations that the conflict which fused the strike was a domestic American matter between labor and capital, the military and government insisted that the strike was a tactic for Japan’s takeover of Hawaii and a race war between Japan and the United States (Okihiro, *Cane Fires* 100). According to the 1918 Merriam Report by Major H. C. Merriam, intelligence officer in the Hawaiian Department, the Japanese problem has three resources of anti-Americanism: the Japanese government through its consul; Japanese languages schools; and Buddhism (Okihiro, *Cane Fires* 103-104). Therefore, the battle for controlling Hawaii necessitates Americanizing Japanese immigrant laborers in Hawaii through exterminating Japanism and promoting American values. As the immigrant generation—the issei—were too attached to Japanese tendencies, the nisei were targeted for Americanization. When Hawaii’s Japanese struggled to identify themselves and determine their destiny, as Okihiro points out, American education was conceived by the nisei as the “promise of equal opportunity and ... a way of moving beyond the curtain of cane” (*Cane Fires* 151). Murayama in his novel has implied the success of American education and the willing as well as forced acceptance of

Americanization by the Japanese issei and nisei: the issei Oyamas have converted to Methodism once they settled in Hawaii while the nisei like Michie Kutsunai act “too damn *heolefied*” or “talk[ed] nasally to hid the pidgin accent,” as a consequence of the propaganda of Americanization that declares the pidgin English foreign (63). In addition, when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred in 1941, the main reaction from the issei was not to fight for Japan or America; instead, they either deny the fact, like the Oyama parents, or admit the unavoidability of the war, like Mr. Takemoto, who states, “The only alternative to a war many times is civil war” (Murayama 83). Stephen Sumida has also registered the assimilationist conscious and subconscious of both issei and nisei in Murayama’s novel: while the nisei in the novel render “the issei must contrast whatever is essentially ‘American,’” the Japanese heritage claimed by the issei is “an interpretation greatly influenced by the circumstances, the histories, and indeed the false identifications imposed on these immigrants in America” (“Japanese American Moral Dilemma” 231).

However, Murayama, who gives the reader “a tangible feel for the language” (Odo 105), insisted on publishing his novel in pidgin English that was mostly used by Japanese Hawaiians in reality, and uttered against the purity of the English-only national language as well as “a language of consciousness of colonial oppression that also critiques the Japanese notion of *yamato damashi*<sup>11</sup> and its complicity with the plantation” (Najita 115). His usage of pidgin English for his characters and his accusation of his characters’ assimilationist ways of thinking engenders a set of questions concerning his adoption of the literary form and genre: behind his unembellished language and realistic narrative, how can this fiction be rooted in its historical context and transmit its ideological force? How does the realistic fiction become the carrier of

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<sup>11</sup> *Yamato damashi* or *yamato gokoro* means “Japanese spirit/soul.” Lafcadio Hearn notes that this discipline functions as an ethical guide and “had brought into existence a wonderful average of character, —a character of surprising patience, unselfishness, honesty, kindness, and docility combined with high courage” (179).

assimilationism and its own counterargument at the same time? How does “reality” in the fiction come to associate with different social voices that influence the writers’ intention? How does this intention become seemingly awry at some fictional moments? What counterforce interferes in the authorial manner of dwelling in political correctness? Is the fragmentation merely part of the reality or a circumstance that betrays the author’s subconsciousness? Does the portrayal of assimilation reflect an authorial desire, an honest mistake, or a broader cultural effort to look for its destination?

#### IV. *The (Sub)Forms of America Is in the Heart*

Readers are inclined to spot Carlos Bulosan’s “key work” (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 45), *America Is in the Heart*, as an autobiography. Asian American literary critics are aware of such misreading and thus advertently position this text as quasi-autobiography, “novelistic collective biography,” “fictionalized autobiography,” or “social realism” (San Juan Jr., *Racial Formations* 109; Libretti 135; Slotkin 843; Higashida 35). San Juan, Jr., recognizes this book as the “only extant epic chronicle of Filipino American workers in the United States” (*Racial Formations* 109). Through these practices of critical re-positioning, critics have raised over the text new controversy, which focuses on two facets. Firstly, the contradictions of the plot and within the presentation of the protagonist, Carlos, are regarded as a reflection of the ambiguity of Bulosan’s political attitudes. Secondly, the book’s ending that affirms a utopian American society contradicts the factual plight and oppression of Filipino laborers in America who are vastly and vividly portrayed in the text, thus indicating Bulosan’s naïve optimism in a racialized American illusion. Such an interpretive background of *America Is in the Heart* rationalizes my reading of Bulosan because all the readings of this book, be they literary or

historiographical, neglect the fact that content and form are not detachable. My reading practice is not intended to coordinate all the conflicting schools of reading. Rather, my purpose is so much humbler and even happier that the honorable, experienced Asian American readers may consider my reading too lenient; I simply want to re-address Henry James's proclamation: "The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle or the needle without the thread" (77). With my emphasis on the dynamics between content and form, to begin with, I will conduct a brief examination of the structural composite of Bulosan's text, then establish the connection between the textual form and content, and respond to the Marxian paradigm as realized in the Asian American reading practice of this book.

One of the main reasons that cause such structural confusion among Asian American critics is Bulosan's conflation of fictional production and empirical portrayal of the Filipino labor population, which blurs the demarcation of fictionality and reality. Marilyn Alquizola has already demonstrated the fictionality of *America Is in the Heart*. In order to draw the distinction between Bulosan the author and Carlos the protagonist, Alquizola in her essay, "The Fictive Narrator of *America Is in the Heart*," approaches the text via two routes that lead to the same destination: the structural distribution and the dialectical relationship between its content and form. Alquizola's study starts with P. C. Morante's formulaic decomposition of *America Is in the Heart*. Morante analyzes the text as "thirty percent Bulosan's autobiography, forty percent case histories of the first-generation Filipino workers in America and thirty percent fiction" (Alquizola, "The Fictive Narrator of *America Is in the Heart*" 211). Therefore, Alquizola proposes two presumptions to help understand Bulosan's integration of Filipino compatriots into his fictional work and his creation of Carlos as "a collective protagonist"—a Filipino individual

with community-oriented consciousness; and the configuration of the collective experience of Filipino laborers is validated through the “one-voice collective ‘I’” (211-12). This interpretation of the collective characters in Bulosan’s text is extensively accepted by Asian American scholarship.

The purpose of drawing such a distinction, according to Alquizola, is to allow “the reader to interpret the text in the most radical way possible” and to bring out the suppressed subtext of the author (“Fictive Narrator” 213). The form of the text thus tunes in such radicalization of the content and its interpretations. Alquizola argues that the unique form of *America Is in the Heart*, first of all, frees the text from the mainstream canonization and institutionalization of American literature. Furthermore, its rejection of the traditional novelistic form completes its critique and defiance of exclusiveness and incompleteness of the American canonical tradition that overlooks the agency of Asian American practice in American literature and history. Accordingly, it offers a critique of the U.S. colonialism in its gamut from the Philippines to the U.S., thus exemplifying the push-and-pull force that drags Filipino American laborers to the continental United States.

The formulaic assessment of *America Is in the Heart* on one hand helps to solve the eventful contradictions and explains the equivocal political views of Bulosan. On the other hand, when she posits a distinction between the author and the character, Alquizola is not ready to cope with problems outside the province of race studies. In her defense of the textual contradictions, Alquizola identifies Carlos the character as “a fool” while “Bulosan is not” (“Fictive Narrator” 212) so as to liberate Bulosan from the blame of the naïve clamor in the closing chapter of *America Is in the Heart*, which states:

It came to me that no man—no one at all—could destroy my faith in America again.... It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my

brothers in America and my family in the Philippines—something that grew out of our desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, *ever*. (Bulosan 326-27)

Her purposeful distinction unfortunately debunks her interpretation of the collectivity of Filipino immigrants in that the assumption that Bulosan intends to showcase the “foolishness” and naivety of the Filipino community does not coincide with his progressive belief in socialism, which emphasizes the collective strength, not mentioning Bulosan’s lifelong, lofty struggle for freedom and dignity of human beings. However, the effect of this potential counterargument is not imposed upon the argument itself but lies in the insufficiency of such an argument.

Alquizola’s self-contradictory argument is further developed into her abstraction that “in the final moment of the text, the protagonist is not affirming an exploitative system, but something more akin to Constitutional ideals” (“Subversion or Affirmation” 200), though E. San Juan, Jr. has already provided more convincing explanation of the textual ending from the aspects of social reality and Bulosan’s own political purviews.

San Juan affirms the contradictions and irony in Bulosan’s writing; but in his research of Bulosan that spans two decades, San Juan continues to insist on the positivity of Bulosan’s portrayal of the Filipino working class and his testament of socialist humanism. Undeniably, San Juan himself has lingered on the question as of how to interpret the closing remarks of the novel. In his Marxist articulation of racial formations, San Juan observes that these final remarks hint at “a utopian hope,” which defines this text as “an ethnic bildungsroman” and consequential of Bulosan’s attempt to “forge the ‘conscience of his race’” (*Racial Formations* 120). However, San Juan’s ensuing explanation cannot suffice the said definition of the text as he wishes.

In another fabled monograph on Bulosan of his, San Juan gives a more coherent reading of *America Is in the Heart*. Strongly believing in Bulosan's contribution to anti-imperialist nationalist movements of Filipino Americans as well as the decolonizing activities of the Philippines when a number of critics assail Bulosan for his naïve hope in America in the closing chapter, San Juan continues to prove that *America Is in the Heart* "memorializes the Filipino workers' rise to self-awareness, the acceptance of their historic mission, by revolt against feudalism and capitalism" (*Imagination of the Class Struggle* 93). San Juan's perseverant dedication to Bulosan's works enables him to address Bulosan's hope in democracy and socialist reconstruction in the fecund "'new world'...—'America' as the reality-effect of class struggle" (*West/East* 148) during World War II. The class struggle and racial resistance that help form American polity and culture are achieved through the insertion of *us*—Asian Americans—as the racial Others that disrupts the Eurocentric America's self-recognition, as Lisa Lowe further claims.

Challenging American literary canon formation, Lowe dismisses the consideration of *America Is in the Heart* as a form of *Bildungsroman* or a novel of formation. In lieu of narrating the protagonist's development from youth to maturity, Lowe reads this text as "troubl[ing] the closure and reconciliation of the bildungsroman form" (*Immigrant Acts* 45). Lowe argues that, rejecting the final destiny of assimilation, Bulosan identifies the "'America' that is 'in the heart'" as "a stratified, contradictory figure divided between the named promise of democracy and the unnamed refugees, immigrants, and victims of violence who live beneath that promise" (47). Lowe additionally questions the practice of unifying and purifying the aesthetic form of *America Is in the Heart* and postulates that rather than complying with or mimicking a nineteenth-century

European genre, Bulosan's text due to its structural confusion denounces the universalizing function of canonization and thematizes the contradiction within the canon formation itself.<sup>12</sup>

Lowe's defense of the formalistic conflation of Bulosan's work can find its explanation in the mimicry theory of Homi Bhabha as well. As Western forms, the genres of autobiography and fiction are inescapable for writers in exile from an ex-colonial or postcolonial land and thus destine Bulosan to such mimicking activities. However, Bhabha's breakthrough theory of mimicry as a colonial discourse discharges exilic writers of this guilt. Colonial mimicry, Bhabha avows, "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same*, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (122; emphasis original). Bulosan's mimicry of the Bildungsroman, in Bhabha's deed of vindication, turns out to be an *inaccurate* repetition of the original Western literary form. The purpose of mimicry is not reconciliation but "at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 123). Both Bhabha and Lowe's postulation that the simple presence of the Other in the textual structure is evidential of confusing and destabilizing the claim for colonial authority or authenticity advances the activity of mimicking autobiography or fiction from static mirroring and illusionary construction into an active disruption. In this sense, Bulosan's writing itself is an articulation of resistance and a claim for survival under racial violence and white supremacy.

Instead of focusing on the fictionality of *America Is in the Heart*, Elaine Kim presents an anthological reading of Bulosan alongside other Asian American writers and outlines the

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<sup>12</sup> Lowe argues in the book chapter, "Canon, Institutionalization, Identity: Asian American Studies," that "the literature itself captures a 'movement between social history and literature.' Asian American literature, by virtue of its distance from the historical formation of American national literature, resists the formal abstraction of aestheticization and canonization" (45). She opines that racialized immigrant subjects are antagonistic to the mainstream narratives, which are constructed in the process of defining literary canon; for this reason, the very activity of inserting the immigrant subjects into the mainstream European literary form is to undo canonization.

historical background when *America Is in the Heart* was published in the 1940s. Kim highlights its attributes of personal narratives and autobiography and regards the text as a “characteristically Asian American genre...dedicated to the task of promoting cultural goodwill and understanding” (*Asian American Literature* 47). From the perspective of the American readership, Kim alleges that the textual form as a personal history or autobiography will strengthen the “veracity and impact” on the popular reading experience and thus “have more market appeal” to the American majority (48). Kim’s revelation of the historical moment of the publication as well as her foremost emphasis on the autobiographical quality of the text, however, alleviate the effect of the decanonization of the text and counterbalance the postcolonialist criticism. Moreover, Kim’s stress on its truthfulness does not and cannot explicate the textual contradictions per se.

As interdisciplinary as Asian American studies essentially is, a complete interpretation of any Asian American literary text necessitates a comprehension of its historical and sociological contexts. Gonzalez and Campomanes’s research on the demographic history of Filipino Americans has assisted to rationalize the textual conflicts from the historical perspective rather than the literary one. The co-authors show their hesitance in defining Filipino America/n due to the fact that such an identity is forged by “the amalgam of U.S. colonization and migratory movements” (63). On the one hand, the unique colonial history of the “serious economic, linguistic, and cultural realities” of the Philippines restrained Filipino writers from achieving their maturity (67). As an autodidactic, Bulosan might have faced the same problem of maturing his text in a Western form. On the other hand, though immature as a Western literary form, the successive colonization has molded all the Western art forms into the spirit of the Philippines itself (71). The national history of the Philippines can thereupon explain the self-conflicted ideological consciousness in Bulosan’s text. Around the time when the book was first published

in 1946, the Philippines were just liberated from the Japanese occupation (1941-1945) and meanwhile entered its nearly half-a-century (1946-1992) neocolonial dependent relationship with the United States. Therefore the content of *America Is in the Heart* was focused upon pre-neocolonialism. The historical and political vicissitudes engendered the ambivalence in Filipino (American) writers' political attitudes towards the U.S. The same colonial phenomenon is beheld by Bulosan sometimes in praise and sometimes in blame. More to the point, the American colonization, which is also recognized as "benevolent assimilation" through colonial education, "has rendered the Filipino psyche permanently seared" to the extent that the "Greater Southeast Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere could not compel the Filipino people brutally enough to turn anti-American" during the Japanese occupation (67). Bulosan has announced his trust in American colonial education, which enlightens Carlos the character. A third historical moment that could help the reader to further understand Bulosan's ambiguity is the origination of Asian American studies and the generic identity of Asian Americans that occurred in 1965, nine years after Bulosan's death. The attribute of panethnicity within Asian America was brought up and developed by Ye Le Espiritu in 1992. In other words, the conception of Asian America was prior to Bulosan. For the above reasons, Bulosan would be more properly considered as a *pre*-Asian American writer, who wrote about the generic collective experience of survival as immigrant subjects that share a sense of ethnic pride rather than a commitment to racial solidarity.

The significance of demarcating Bulosan and early Asian immigrant writers from the post-1965 generations lies in their ideological perception of racial formations, which is recorded and reflected in the form and content of early Asian American fictions. It would be inaccurate to blame Bulosan for assimilation: Bulosan's criticism of the American society was the corollary of the limitations of the historical and sociological environment in the early twentieth century. It

would be as well naïve and reductive to regard Bulosan's works as "dedicated to the task of promoting cultural goodwill and understanding" as Kim declares (*Asian American Literature* 45) because compared with the early Asian American writers examined by Kim, such as Wu Tingfang, Park No-Yong, and Younghill Kang, Bulosan's proletariat background and belief in socialism determines that the focus of his observations is placed upon the most resistant social components, rather than seeking unconditional acceptance from the Eurocentric American nationalism. If we simply parallel him with the other early Asian American voices represented by the aforementioned writers, we cannot find a solid ground for his socialist redemption.

His socialist redemption is often mistaken for the pursuit of racial solidarity. However, his critical delineations of Chinese and Japanese Americans betray the interethnic inequality within the suppressed race. For instance, Japanese Americans are portrayed as a foil to Filipino laborers. Japanese contractors, who make "a fortune from [their] double-dealings with the companies and with the workers" (Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* 222), are singled out by Bulosan to further demonstrate the class stratification within the racial stratification. Furthermore, the reality that Filipino workers took gambling as one of the few entertainments they could enjoy with their meager income is simultaneously historical and fictional. Because all the gambling houses were run by Chinese, Chinese alongside Japanese communities enhanced class oppression upon Filipino workers. Through Claro, a Filipino worker Carlos meets in Stockton, an unfiltered image of Chinese monopoly and exploitation of immigrant workers is given in an ultimatum:

"The Chinese syndicates, the gambling lords, are sucking the blood of our people. The Pinoys work every day in the fields but when the season is over their money is in the Chinese vaults! And what do the Chinese do? Nothing! I see them only at night in their

filthy gambling dens waiting for the Filipinos to throw their hard-earned money on the tables. Why, the Chinese control this town! The local banks can't do business without them, and the farmers, who badly need the health and interest of their Filipino workers, don't want to do anything because they borrow money from the banks." (Bulosan 118)

However, it is socialism that turns the same character into bawling out Japan's invasion into China and dropping bombs "upon the peaceful Chinese people" (Bulosan 277). The vivid depiction of intraracial tensions between Chinese and Filipino workers foregrounds Bulosan's final conversion to socialism, which he reckons as the only way to survive the dehumanization of the industrialized U.S., though it has to endure a gradual process. It is also through socialism that Bulosan wishes a utopian unification regardless of racial differences that were mapped on American soil. Thus, labor formation theorized by Marxism and catalyzed in socialism frames the racial formation in Bulosan's empirical depiction of America.

The theory of racial formation is defined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformation, and destroyed" (55). In order to emphasize the determinative function of race in the United States national projects, Omi and Winant presuppose "the specificity of race as an autonomous field of social conflict, political organization, and cultural/ideological meaning" (48). Towards a race formation perspective, the co-authors assure that the traditional ethnicity-, class-, and nation-based perspectives are paradigms of race theory. In Bulosan's writing, however, the three old perspectives are reciprocal and the temporary conflicts with one another vindicate the primitive theme of survival.

The formation of the Filipino community in *America Is in the Heart* is developed in three simultaneous phases: the construction of the global market based on the U.S. imperialism and

colonization in the Philippines that introduced colonial education to the colonized subjects and generated the hiatus of the Filipino psyche; class struggles and consciousness of the Filipino American laborers in the U.S.; and the ultimate awareness of the racial formation of the U.S. The intricate formation of the Filipino American workers as the racial, class, and national subordinates is concretized in the dissonance of Carlos's psychological growth and the representative collective class consciousness of the social stratification of the Pinoys. The conception of race was preceded by the moment of survival. Therefore, survival for early Asian migrants was less a coherent concept that could be summarized and categorized as a racial formation perspective than an expedient solution. Subjects of survival were still divided in light of ethnicities, classes, and even national origins. In the novel, when Carlos's country fellow Claro is boycotting Japanese stores in the U.S. during WWII in response to the national movement of boycotting Japanese products in Manila, he does not realize that Japanese in America are as well the victims of racial profiling and white supremacy; instead, he conflates Japanese Americans with Japanese nationals as the mainstream American propaganda did. On this front, the awakening of class consciousness does not necessarily lead to a full-fledged awareness of racial formation of the United States.

The unique history of the Filipino American laborers, which is tethered to "Others (Spaniards, Japanese, the *Amerikanos*)" (San Juan, *Racial Formations* 118), is a subtle but significant reference to explain why Filipinos are regarded as the most Westernized and Americanized among all Asian Americans and self-identified as Americans even without legitimation of the U.S. citizenship. San Juan maintains that the U.S. cultural colonization in the Philippines does not simply cause "the loss of autonomy" of the nation; to compensate for such a loss, Filipinos have identified themselves "with U.S. ego ideals, from Lincoln to Elvis Presley"

(*Racial Formations* 117). Consequently, having been relocated to the continental America, “Filipinos find themselves ‘at home’ in a world they’ve lived before—not just in Hollywood fantasies but in the material culture of everyday life” (San Juan, *Racial Formations* 117). The perplexity of their self-identification illustrates that the inner contradictions imbued in *America Is in the Heart* are not the mere corollary of Bulosan’s deteriorating health and his rush to finishing six hundred pages of this book in twenty-eight days (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 56); rather, the textual discordance diagnoses consistent military and institutional colonizations in the Philippines for four centuries, reflects the disillusionment of the collective psyche of the “I” in the text, and consequently determines the form of “contradictory or antinomic behavior the Filipino is capable of manifesting as ethnic/racial subject in the terrain of U.S. late capitalism” (San Juan, *Racial Formations* 120).

The inveterate discordance in the Filipinos’ material and cognitive history is central to the content of Bulosan’s writing; but it does not spoil the solidity of his ideological expression. Instead, the instable formality of the text repetitively implies and enhances Carlos’s final conversion to socialism and thus becomes Bulosan’s formalist maneuver. The partial fictionality of the textual form employs socialist realism that insinuates from the beginning of the book Bulosan’s ultimate submission to socialism and communism. Despite the variant textual form, the language of the novel, which is “the system of its ‘languages’” (Bahktin 262), is ideologically saturated. It will be impossible to understand Bulosan’s authorial intention without detecting the internal stratification in Carlos’s narration. Bulosan’s belief in socialism frames his text as a discourse that historicizes and materializes class stratification and racial differentiation at the same time.

Carlos's recall of the peasant life in the Philippines points to the reality of the native life under the dual oppression by the relatively idealized U.S. colonial institutionalization and the contrasting damnation of the local feudal system. The Philippines in the early 20th century still featured peasant feudalism and absentee ownership in addition to the U.S. annexation. In Bulosan's nostalgic narration, his adoption of a Western discursive mode betrays his critique of the tradition of feudalism and absentee ownership. More than deeming the ritual of stoning Leon's deflowered bride as cruel and "fast-dying," Carlos celebrates its abolition "in line with other feudal customs in the Philippines, yielding to the new ways of the younger generation that were shaping out sharply from the growing industrialism" (Bulosan 7). Bulosan's act of "revealing" the backwardness of the feudal traditions in the Philippines has been denounced as a faux pas by Asian Americanists, who proclaim that there were no such conventions in the Philippines.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding, Bulosan's intention of criticism is not imposed upon feudalism of the Philippines. His invention of this tradition turns out to be borrowed from the Roman Catholic ritual of papal election. The election is conducted in a sequestered meeting by the College of Cardinals in a secret conclave, with the electors casting secret ballots. If the vote is inconclusive, the burnt paper ballot will produce black smoke while white smoke signifies the success of selecting a new pope ("Papal election"). By manipulating this Catholic tradition, Bulosan satirizes barbarianism that inheres in the Spanish colonization of the Philippines. Bulosan's maneuver of this historical event further demonstrates the discrepancy between literature and history.

The homogenizing heteroglot "I" becomes Bulosan's eyes and sees through the conflicts imbedded in a society that was struggling between feudalism and industrialism, barbarianism and civilization, independence and reliance. Through the politically unconscious character of Carlos,

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<sup>13</sup> I attribute my discovery of this argument to Professor Stephen Sumida.

Bulosan is not devoid of sympathy with the burgeoning petite bourgeoisie while he also discerns this social class's failure to play a tectonic role in the social structure of the Philippines. Carlos's mother, Meteria, though depicted as "a shadowy presence" at the beginning of the text, "quickly materializes" (Higashida 45) as a puny petit bourgeois. Meteria, by selling *boggoong* (salted fish) in the market, epitomizes the peasant's transition to the petite bourgeois, who unfortunately lacked a market for development. It was the social reality that the seeds of capitalism were sown by American industrialism but unable to grow under the pressure of absentee ownership and coloniality of the Philippines. Bulosan never hesitates to present the limitation of this social stratum that could not complete its transformation from the peasantry. In his first clash with the middle class in Puzorobio, Allos/Carlos distances himself from his submissive mother, who "crawled on her knees scooping up the [spilled] beans into the basket" while keeping saying, "It is all right, ... It is all right" (Bulosan 38).

Carlos's maturation, which shifts geographically from the Philippines to the continental U.S., and psychologically from a rural Filipino teenager to a Filipino American socialist and nationalist, has highlighted the *Bildungsroman* feature of this semi-autobiographical novel. This is no surprise: as Georg Lukács has explained, "[i]t is striking that both bourgeois and socialist literatures have shown a preference for the autobiographical *Bildungsroman*. ... Both types of society are, unlike earlier societies, in a state of constant, dynamic change. An individual growing up in them has to work things out for himself and struggle for a place in the community" (*Realism in Our Time* 111-12). The adoption of the *Bildungsroman* as the major form of early Asian American literature stems from an urgent pursuit of historicizing Asian America in the mainstream American culture; a realistic—and often autobiographical—presentation of Asian Americans and their predicaments in American society at large meets such needs. For this reason,

the Bildungsroman becomes a tool of Asian America's self-delineation. However, Bulosan's writing is not mainly occupied by a Bildungsroman theme and "Carlos's status as the typical bildungsroman hero" is undermined by Bulosan's writing activities of "showing the faulty premise upon which [Carlos] establishes his faith in American dream" (Wesling 71). Meg Wesling demonstrates Bulosan's dissatisfaction with the Western Bildungsroman through his engagement "with the logic of President McKinley's project of 'benevolent assimilation' and illustrates how the U.S. education system functioned as a violent regime of colonial dominance" (59). According to Wesling, Bulosan has brilliantly chosen a teenage boy's voice so as to avoid criticism for a lack of anti-colonialism in his paradoxical narrative. The authorial decision is meant to accentuate the dialectical tension between knowing and unknowing.

Wesling notices that Carlos's transformation is made inadvertent due to the fact that it happens alongside coincidences, repetitions, and unlikely fortune. In his conspicuous expression as well as his memorization of the past, through his admiration of his educated brother, Macario, Carlos has shown his strong belief in American formal education and positioned the U.S. annexation in favor of enlightening the Filipinos:

Popular education was spreading throughout the archipelago and this opened up new opportunities. It was a new and democratic system brought by the American government into the Philippines, and a nation hitherto illiterate and backward was beginning to awaken. In Spanish times education was something that belonged to exclusively to the rulers and to some fortunate natives affluent enough to go to Europe. But the poor people, the peasants, were denied even the most elementary schooling. When the free education

that the United States had introduced spread throughout the islands, every family who had a son pooled in resources and sent him to school. (Bulosan 14)<sup>14</sup>

However, his faith in American education becomes a hallucination in dealing with the challenges Carlos later stumbles onto in America. Furthermore, Macario, the only educated son in Carlos's family, is entirely defeated in America. As a Pinoy, who cannot use his *American* education in America (Bulosan 271), Macario is constantly haunted by the threat of unemployment and illnesses. In order to look after Carlos after he is diagnosed of tuberculosis, Macario, despite his universal ideas and lofty ideals, takes a job as a pantryman in an Italian restaurant, which eventually gives him cracked, rough, twisted, ugly bleeding hands (Bulosan 241). American education is useless for Filipinos to survive a white-dominated America. The incompetency of American education in preparing Filipinos for social cruelty of racial and labor stratifications is declared by Bulosan in his emphatic description of Carlos's shifted literary interests from Daniel Defoe and Abraham Lincoln to Richard Wright and Maxim Gorky. Increasingly, the Western Bildungsroman ceases to fulfill the teleological requirement of itself.

The Western Bildungsroman often depends upon translating a theme of formation and transformation into undetermined characters. The finality of *America Is in the Heart* that pictures a successfully transformation of Carlos does amplify the signals of a fulfilled teleology of the Bildungsroman. Franco Moretti observes that ideally the Bildungsroman "attempts to *build* the Ego, and make it the indisputable center of its own structure" (11; italics original). The forging of the Ego in Bulosan's works exemplifies his own acclamation for individual, intellectual independence and his call to action for racial justice and freedom. Therefore, the centrality of his ego, unlike the Western Bildungsroman, is "connected...to the theme of socialization...—the idea of 'normality'," which is defined "against its opposite: against pathology, emargination,

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<sup>14</sup> Wesling uses the same quote in her study of Bulosan's critique of colonial education.

repression” (Moretti 11). However, Moretti argues that the Western Bildungsroman does the opposite by patterning the characters with internalization, through which the character—“a ‘free individual,’ not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen...perceives the social norms as *one’s own*” (Moretti 16; emphasis original). The individual in the Bildungsroman, “as a *system* of social and political relationships,” rather than fighting for self-determination, “tends to settle itself into an operational mode that is predictable, regular, ‘normal.’ Like all systems, it demands agreement, homogeneity, consensus” (Moretti 16; emphasis original). The *normality* in *America Is in Heart* is the one that is dominating, privileged, and stratified in terms of race and class, which never means and can never become “one’s own” for both individual and collective Filipinos. Bulosan’s Carlos is conclusively not a Bildungshelden.<sup>15</sup>

Once the Western Bildungsroman being dismissed, two significant textual form are left to designate *America Is in Heart*—critical social realism (Higashida 35) and socialist realism (San Juan, Jr.). In his argument about the relationship between critical realism and socialist realism, Lukács is concerned with the significance and limitations of these two literary forms. According to Lukács, “[t]he perspective of socialist realism is...the *struggle* for socialism” (*Realism in Our Time* 93; italics mine). Bulosan portrays the struggle from the inside perspective of the peasantry and working class represented by Carlos. The *inside* perspective rightly differentiates the book from the critical realist novel, which describes the forces working towards socialism from the *outside*. Such inside pictures do more than focusing on the physical suffering of the exploited working class; they display the instability and contradictions within the working class in the gradual process towards the socialist course as well. When depicting Filipino laborers in the U.S., Bulosan adopts the strategy of critical realism by relating to the whole, that is, the American

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<sup>15</sup> The conception of the Bildungsroman will be offered with more detailed analyses in the next chapter on the Asian American transformation novels.

society, through Carlos the protagonist as a minor segment. Bulosan does not simply accept socialism and avoid any conflicting voice within the exploited class. Rather, his self-incongruity in the text is illustrative of the socialistic process that “aims to eliminate the antagonistic character of social contradictions” (Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* 120). Criticizing dogmatic sectarianism, which used to dominate socialist literary works, Lukács emphasizes the function of literature:

Literature has the immensely important task of describing this process, of exploring the problems thrown up by it, of showing how some traditional problems disappear and others are modified. If, however, the elimination of this antagonistic character is seen as something immediately realizable, rather than a process, both the antagonism and the contradiction, the motor of all development, will disappear from the reality to be depicted.

(*Realism in Our Time* 120)

In this process, the conflicting class consciousness of Carlos has experienced three stages: peasants, proletariat, and eventually socialist, which wonderfully fall into the ideal historical progression of the Marxist theory.

For readers who consider *America Is in the Heart* as a socialistic realist opua, however, they find it more acceptable to explain Bulosan’s naked and even virulent depictions of the effete Filipino community in the U.S. as vivid examples of American racial discrimination. This politically correct point of view in defining the literary form of *America Is in the Heart* appears insufficient and moderate and thus lacks strength of making a solid literary inquiry. Furthermore, such a scrupulous attitude that rids the criticism of controversy attempts to avoid a strenuous ordainment of Bulosan’s brutal descriptions of the Filipino community by simply and conveniently altering its focus on the individual progress of Carlos. The conventional criticism of

*America Is in the Heart* therefore becomes unilateral for its lack of critical inquiry of Bulosan's audacious exposure of the quotidian lives of the Filipino laborers in the text and devalues its literary integrity. In other words, the decadent lives of the Filipino American laborers becomes so natural and true to history that makes Asian American literary critics hold on to a sociological and historical interpretation of the text rather than a literary methodology in order to avoid controversy. The fictionality of the book is thereupon intentionally overlooked.

A literary critique, rather than a historiographical or sociological one, is necessary to fill the gap in the literary study of the textual fictionality. "A study of subgenres," Richard Lehan argues in his examination of American literary realism and naturalism, "reveals that most novels are made up of several subforms through which they depict a special and distinct reality" (*Realism and Naturalism* 71). So is *America Is in the Heart*. The advent of naturalism occurs when realism has been brought to the limit of its narrative structuring principle (Jackson 13). Dedicated to a truthful description of Carlos's "underworld," Bulosan adopts naturalism as the mode of his narrative and delineation of Filipino laborers. This creative gesture is certainly in dangerous turmoil due to the argument revolving around naturalism<sup>16</sup>. The naturalistic destruction that causes inconsistency cannot be denied in the textual investigation of *America Is in the Heart*. But the traces of naturalism are apparently and ardently displayed in Bulosan's production of the book. The publishing timeline and his health condition probably had not left Bulosan much time to consider a strategy devoid of naturalistic depictions of the real Filipino

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<sup>16</sup> Naturalism is more than any other literary forms devoid of goodness. Naturalist novels have "a pathological hold on the novelist's imagination" (Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism* 193), in which the human beings are destined to their self-destruction by their biological—most of all, sexual—compulsion. Developed on Darwinism or the theory of evolution, nationalism presents a societal struggle between barbarity and civilization. Though it originated with a tendency to "study the natural causes of events, or to explain or justify morality from *nature* or *human nature*" (Williams 216; emphasis original), as the naturalists "believed that the existence of such sexual urges were evidence that the human condition is inseparable from drives rooted in chemistry and repudiated the Enlightenment assumption that the individual was free to behave in an essentially rational manner" (Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism* 193), naturalism is criticized for being pessimistic and deterministic.

community for the sake of political correctness. Though the ending part of the book turns out to be teleological and saturated with communist advocacy, the content of the rest of the book is operated “as a social corrective, forcing a reevaluation of cultural ‘truth’” (Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism* 7) by questioning the social norms and offering the disillusionment of American dreams, which is favored by naturalism.

Bulosan’s composition is a reflex of the debate among literary theoreticians over the relationship between naturalism and realism, critical realism and socialist realism, and naturalism and socialism. As a Marxist and literary theoretician, Lukács never forgot to divide a neutral concept of naturalism into bourgeois and socialist ideological categories: The former “expressed the bourgeois writer’s bafflement, his inability to discover a rational pattern in the multiplicity of facts,” while in the latter form “the polarization into the dogmatism and pragmatism...had to result in a false aesthetics” that brings Marxism “too directly to bear on practical, day-to-day problems” (Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* 119). In a word, Lukács assails literary naturalism, bourgeois or socialist, for its depriving “life of its poetry” and reducing “all to prose,” and its incapability of “grasping the ‘slyness’ of reality, its wealth and beauty” (*Realism in Our Time* 125).

Nonetheless, we can chart the gradations in the transition of Bulosan’s narrative mode from a combination of naturalism and critical realism to socialist realism ultimately. The formation of his narrative modes falls for the historical process of the Filipino labor force from peasantry to the proletariat. This transition illustrates Bulosan’s awareness and recordation of the social and historical transition from pre-capitalism of the Philippines to industrialism and imperialism of the U.S. Richard Lehan recognizes that “[o]ne of the main themes of literary naturalism is the conflict between barbarity and civilization” (*Realism and Naturalism* 189). So

is Bulosan's portrayal of the Philippines and the Filipino laborers in America. Bulosan is utterly mindful of the numbness of the young immigrant students and does not hesitate to display the Filipino bachelors' promiscuity. In his brief sketch, when the young students on the boat from Honolulu to Seattle are "discussing the coming presidential election in the United States. Not far from them was a dying boy from Pangasinan" (Bulosan 98). The scenario that Carlos is forced to witness the Filipino community's orgies of drinking and prostitution is not unusual in the book either. The disillusionment of his American dreams makes Carlos clamor,

I almost died within myself. I died many deaths in these surroundings, where man was indistinguishable from beast....our decadence was imposed by a society alien to our character and inclination, alien to our heritage and history. It took me a long time, then, to erase the outward scars of these years, but the deep, invisible scars inside me are not wholly healed and forgotten. (Bulosan 135)

Bulosan also adopts a naturalistic method when he describes the intra-racial and interethnic tension among Filipino, Chinese and Japanese laborers in America. This factual reaction portrayed by Bulosan reflects his growing class consciousness which can be impeded by tribalism, or ethnic sensitivity.

The naturalistic subform of *America Is in the Heart* does deprive the text of its wealth and beauty, which reaches an agreement with Lukács. But the act of deprivation *per se* responds to the Filipino laborers' predicament in America as racial and class inferiors. Bulosan's text holds on to the determinist feature of literary naturalism, which imparts the message that "society is a function of the workings of heredity and environment" (Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism* 149). However, the social heredity and environment in Bulosan's text are not merely determined by capitalism and industrialism, which alienates Bulosan from Lukács's bourgeois naturalists. The

textual society, rather, is partly capitalistic, partly agrarian, and fully racially stratified. Therefore, Bulosan does not only see the struggle between capital and labor but also the struggle within the racialized labor itself. Instead of reducing social justice to mere economic determinism, he believes that social justice cannot be simply achieved through economic equality, which is inaccessible to the Filipinos as well as other laborers of color. His refusal to economic reduction determines that naturalism can be only part of the textual form; but this part is necessary.

The form defines the ideological content and vice versa. In Lukács's words, it is the *perspective* that determines both form and content. The varying subforms of *America Is in the Heart* are employed and changed by Bulosan according to his consistent purpose of brandishing the plight of Filipino laborers, racial violence, and socialist solution that impugns the productive mode of American capitalism. Similar to American naturalists such as Upton Sinclair, Bulosan's themes are more complex than his characters that embody them. Bulosan shows no hesitation to depict Carlos's disgust of Alfredo, a cad who befriends Carlos's brother Amado and finally becomes a playboy upon his return to the Philippines. Bulosan does not give up Alfredo and Amado because they are untypical of the Pinoys in America. The characters like Alfred and Amado serve to illustrate the new, industrialized, and urbanized world in America—destructive both to the soul and body of new immigrants like Alfred and Amado. Moreover, not only for once does Carlos express his own emerging violence while he preaches for remaining purity, gentleness, and kindness of his heart. Furthermore, the interethnic distrust among Asian American laborers is never concealed by Bulosan in his storyline.

What disables naturalism to dominate Bulosan's book is the protagonist's gradual discovery of and ultimate conversion to socialism. When American naturalists are criticized for not being able to "find the means to totalize—that is, give coherent meaning to—a world beyond

capitalism” (Lehan, *Realism and Naturalism* 149), Bulosan looks beyond the limitation of bourgeois naturalists, whose perspective implies “a rescue operation for humanity rather than any breakthrough to Socialism” (Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* 92). Due to Bulosan’s socialistic conversion, he does not “close[s] his eyes to the future, give[s] up any chance of assessing the present correctly, [or] lose[s] the ability to create other than purely static works of art” (Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* 60). The course of history in Bulosan’s work does not end up being stagnant but progressive, affirmative and positive, which attunes itself and serves the purpose of Asian Americans’ survival in the Promised Land of America. Bulosan’s narrative technique becomes indeed not simply a *form* but a *formation* that corresponds to the instable and developmental survival strategy of Asian American narrations.

#### V. *Realism, Satire and History in All I Asking for Is My Body*

Milton Murayama’s *All I Asking for Is My Body* is similar to Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* for possessing a controversial ending, except that the controversy is not around the form but over the content. Stephen H. Sumida, as one of the few Asian Americanists who have undertaken thorough examinations of *All I Asking*, maintains that “th[is] novel ends with a restoration of the accepted, conventional order of things, not with a rejection of it. So unexpected is the happy ending that it seems at first to be unrealistic; some readers complain that it is a *dues* [sic] *ex machina*” (*And the View from the Shore* 111). But unlike *America Is in the Heart*, controversial delineations in *All I Asking* do not run through the plot; rather, Murayama’s depiction of the family “is highly realistic not only in showing the chokehold that the plantation’s wages, the plantation’s stores, and other deductions inflict on the family’s survival

and values but also in characterizing the chonan<sup>17</sup> and his expected duties in a far-less-than-ideal family” (Sumida, *And the View from the Shore* 132). The approximation of reality, consistency of the plot and character development, and explicit fictionality of this novella collaboratively reduce dispute over its genre. As a result, it is handy to surrender the form of its narrative to realism and ignore other formalistic elements that comprise this novella. Such an assumption aims to characterize *All I Asking* as “a powerful criticism of authoritarianism and tyranny in Japanese American community from the *nisei* perspective” (Kim, *Asian American Literature* 143).

Elaine Kim’s reading practice of *All I Asking* chiefly focuses on the conflicts between the *issei* parents, who claim to live on the traditional Japanese family values, and the *nisei* children, who juggle family responsibilities with self-demands for independence. According to Kim, the *nisei*, represented by the Oyama brothers, Toshio and Kiyoshi, suffer a lingering oppression from the *issei*. The dual hierarchies of the Japanese families and the Hawaiian plantation stimulate the *nisei*’s desire for a personal escape in pursuit of freedom and individuality. Toshio’s rants throughout the book and Kiyoshi’s final enlistment therefore should be understood as an avouchment of the *nisei*’s individuality. Based on such interpretations, Kim’s conclusion maintains that *All I Asking* is “a rejection of the oppressive aspects of the Japanese family system and the plantation system that nurtured it, in favor of the freedom of the individual” (*Asian American Literature* 146). Sau-ling C. Wong’s discernment coincides with Kim’s observations. Through an examination of the alimentary images in certain Asian American novels such as *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, Wong diagnoses that the dissent between the immigrant generation and their children stems from the American-born characters’ contention “with more diffuse and potent societal forces, such as the

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<sup>17</sup> *Chonan* means the eldest son in a Japanese family.

structural enclosure of minorities or stratification of the labor market by race and gender,” which shows “the extent of their obliviousness to the context of the family’s life” (*Reading Asian American Literature* 39). Wong’s critique of the second-generation Japanese Americans seems applicable to Toshio, who at first sight is enlightened by the Western value of individuality.

Due to the particular history and geography of Hawaii, its literature is always marginalized in the categories of the mainstream American literature and Asian American literature as well. No one has ever conducted a disquisition in Murayama’s works as thoroughly as Sumida. His close reading of the novel challenges the aforementioned interpretations of *All I Asking*. He claims attention to the fact that this novella has been widely reduced to merely “a declaration of independence, a statement made first by the rebellious and headstrong eldest brother of the novel’s narrator, who in turn learns what it means to value, to want, and then to gain freedom from unjust obligations and servitude” (*And the View from the Shore* 111). Sumida continues to argue that the novel begins with “an affirmation of authority” (111) the *issei* impose upon the *nisei* rather than addresses an attempted escape from it. When the parents try to dissuade Kiyoshi from befriending Makot for the reason that Makot’s parents are in the prostitution business, serving Filipino workers on the plantation, the insurrectionary Toshio takes the parents’ side and confirms their parental authority. Consequently, Murayama’s first intention in the novel appears to counter the theme postulated by Kim. Sumida further points up another misreading of *All I Asking* that overemphasizes the detrimental agency of filial piety and uses it “to exemplify what is wrong with the immigrants’ hierarchical and authoritarian values, culture, and community. It assumes that, because of their American education, the *nisei* children exemplify an American response to Japanese parental oppression” (116). In his correction, Sumida contends that *All I Asking* is not to condemn the family values used as oppressive tools

by the *issei* parents; instead, it accuses the institutionalization of the plantation economy and resumes the family and community of the Japanese laborers on the Hawaiian plantation (117).

Sumida's critique of the novella and general interpretations whereof is a restatement of a position he had defended in his earlier essay on Japanese American moral dilemmas in Murayama's *All I Asking for Is My Body*. Though his focus of critique is placed upon the content of the text, enthused by such critique, I tend to testify the ambiguity of Japanese Hawaiians' survival mechanism addressed in this novella via form. While social realism is taken for granted as the narrative form of *All I Asking*, Sumida has enriched the forms of *All I Asking* by categorizing it as "a proletarian novel" (110), a Bildungsroman, a satire, and "in form and function a lean comedy" (*And the View from the Shore* 117). Though detecting these narrative forms, he offers no detailed explanations to these formalistic categorizations, where my research will fill in and by starting with an investigation of satire, I will proceed to the inquiry as of how the narrative form and subforms of *All I Asking* respond to its content.

Frank Palmeri, who has jointly with Leon Guilhamet rescued satire "from theoretical marginality" (Ball 9), offers an access to distinguishing satire from novelistic forms, such as realism. Satire as a genre is specified by Palmeri as *narrative satire* in order to differentiate it from verse satire and other forms of narrative. Satire is not unique to novels; it is encompassed in a variety of creative categories, such as fiction and poetry, with the aim at questioning current social norms and authorization. Therefore, narrative satire serves as a concept of oppositionality, which is articulated as "resistance, subversion, counter-discourse, contestatory narrative, writing back, and critique" (Ball 2). However, this function as opposing to the authority does not avail itself of a full power of protest. To be more accurate, it never meant to. Narrative satire on this front appears to be ambiguous and even self-contradictory because it "in its full form criticizes

one side of a cultural opposition, but also turns to undermine the position that its previous criticism had seemed to endorse. In this form of satire, neither of the opposite extremes is authorized, but each is parodied or criticized strongly. Moreover, it is also usually difficult to infer a normative position between these two extremes” (Palmeri, “Narrative Satire in the Nineteenth Century” 360). Through his reading of the eighteenth-century English and European literatures, Palmeri indicates that narrative satire, although exhibits antithesis to orthodoxy, unveils the dialectical relationship between the authorization and its opposite rather than commits to an absolute rejection of either extreme. This feature of satiric narrative replaces a meaningful closure with an open conclusion; in the process of such narrative formation, narrative satire is defined through repeated inversion of value and implications instead of authorizing either position.

It is the very feature defined by subversion that differentiates modern or postmodern satire from its “stale and moldy” style, which, according to New Criticism theoreticians, “cannot speak for the twentieth century” (Frye 78; Weisenburger 1). Satire is traditionally understood as “against the exemplars of folly and vice, to rectify them according to norms of good behavior and right thinking” and this model of satiric practice is characterized as *generative* (Weisenburger 1), represented by Alexander Pope and Mark Twain. Similar but prior to Weisenburger, when most critics still regarded irony as a series of strategies and techniques, Alan Wilde treats irony as a mode of consciousness. In his perception, irony is “variably responsive to changes in man’s ongoing, necessarily creative history” rather than “a fixed tropological device [or] as a static way of apprehending the world” (Wilde 14). Wilde’s theorization of irony has made a major breakthrough by approaching modern irony from a phenomenological perspective. Generative irony, as one of the three forms of irony categorized

by Wilde, is labeled with “the attempt, inspired by the negotiations of self and the world, to create, tentatively and provisionally, anironic<sup>18</sup> enclaves of value in the face of—but not in place of—a meaningless universe” (148). Generative satire does not presume the responsibility of discovering a utopia; in accordance with the mundane universe by recognizing the way things are, it assents instead of dissents with the ordinary, impermanent, existing world. Echoing Wilde’s perception of generative satire, Weisenburger maintains that the generative satire is “to construct consensus, and to deploy irony in the work of stabilizing various cultural hierarchies” (1). To reshape satiric writing and its criticism in the twentieth century, Weisenburger emphasizes a postmodern phenomenon, which demands a radically subversive mode and thus a degenerative model of satire. In other words, the joint action of subversion and degeneration entails narrative satire to be the very form of modern/postmodern conception of satire. Postmodern, degenerative satirists interrogate the violence of representation and the inherent terror in cultural forms of discourse. This nature of postmodern, degenerative satire constructs a realistic portrayal of the plantation life in Hawaii and places *All I Asking* in the spectrum of modernity. However, Murayama does not cling to a modernist or postmodernist strategy of creation; he sticks to realism because his purpose is not to *present* with indifference but to *represent* the voice of Japanese laborers in pre-WWII Hawaii with purposefulness: realism, owing to its deterministic component of (and also controversy over) verisimilitude, enables Murayama to criticize a

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<sup>18</sup> Wilde argues that “all irony, regarded as a perceptual encounter with the world, generates in response to its vision of disparity (or in some cases is generated by) a complementary, more conceptual vision of wholeness or singleness, which I want to refer to as the *anironic*” (30). For example, when in irony the world is perceived as disharmonious, fragmented, and deviating from some preexistent norm, anironic offers a contrasting version that features earthly harmony, wholeness, and coherence.

racially demarcated and class-stratified society of Hawaii. Meanwhile, the satiric narrative keeps Murayama from being a doctrinaire <sup>19</sup>and allows an ending without a closure or a solution.

Although the first part of *All I Asking for Is My Body*, “I’ll Crack Your Head *Kotsun*,” cannot be sufficiently exemplified as Murayama’s satire, it foregrounds the deployment of satire in the authorial narration. As is stated above, the book does not begin with escapism but with a declaration and an affirmation of the parental authority. However, the opening chapter obfuscates the reader because it fails to insinuate the argument between Toshio and the parents that dominates this novella, but succeeds in resonating the optimistic ending. “I’ll Crack Your Head *Kotsun*,” which is Father Oyama’s remarks made in a rift of rage, sets up the satiric narrative. The first part of the book, without explicitly revealing Mrs. Sasaki, Makot’s mother, as a prostitute, *refuses* to “claim access to a truth that transcends particular social and cultural conditions” (Pamelri, *Satire in Narrative* 17). The refusal is perfectly achieved through a child’s voice, Kiyoshi, who, as a child, can reasonably remain unknowing to the definitive world. The main subsidiary characters in part one, Makot and his parents, being the only Japanese in the Filipino camp, are considered as pariahs. Suspected of prostitution by the Japanese community, Mrs. Sasaki “violates the notion of *yamato damashi*, the Japanese sense of racial purity and superiority” because the Sasaki’s involvement with the Filipinos “blurs racial boundaries” and thus brings shame on the Japanese racial group (Najita, “Pleasure and Colonial Resistance” 117).

Murayama strategically uses irony to unveil the moral dilemma of the Oyamas without necessarily making his own judgment. While Mother and Father despise the Sasaki’s for their dual violation of moral principles and racial stratification, they ignore the fact that the respectable Obaban is not much different from Mrs. Sasaki. Obaban in Kiyoshi’s remembrance

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander Cowie in his historical study of American novel states that early American satirists were more sufficiently skilled and interested in narrative in order to avoid becoming mere doctrinaire writers in comparison with sentimentalist and didactic writers (38).

personalizes wisdom, compassion, and strength, and poses as a spiritual mentor of the Oyamas, in particular of Mother. When Mother has all her teeth pulled out, it is Obaban who Mother needs most. However, both Sumida and Najita propose that Obaban is not all that flawless and cannot even embody the traditional Japanese values. Obaban comes to Hawaii as an outcast disinherited by her family when she elopes with Anshan's father within the forty-nine-day mourning period after her father's decease, which infringes the Buddhist dharma. As a result, Obaban is regarded with no sexual restraint by the Japanese community on the plantation and their disrespect for her is implied by Anshan in naming her "hot pants" (Murayama 18). The importance of Obaban in the family is consequently alleviated. The alleviation is finalized upon her death as a substitute for Mother Oyama, where Murayama carries a satiric tone in the narrative when Kiyoshi asks Mother to get false teeth, an act that reduces the tragedy of Obaban's death.

It is also noticeable that, besides Obaban, all the Oyamas are beheld as "hot pants" (Murayama 18). In addition to Obaban's unconventional behavior, the reality that Father keeps Mother pregnant constantly and they bear seven children eventually illustrates this public condemnation too. Their disgust of Japanese value violators including the Sasaki thus contradicts and collides with their persistent defense of Japanese values and proves their hypocrisy. Such hypocrisy is further and consistently exemplified in their imposition of the *chonnan*'s duty upon Toshio. Sumida has fully devoted to the demonstration of contradictions and hypocrisy within the characters. He observes that "[w]hile Mother boasts of her devotion to Japanese traditions, especially spiritual ones, she like Father is a Methodist... Father, like Grandfather before him, fails at his own business, never mind the Japanese pride that swells up in their parables for right living" (*And the View from the Shore* 119).

The generational conflicts within the Oyama family takes a forefront in the rest of the novel and are upgraded with a revelation of \$6,000 debt carried on by the parents, who enforce their sons to take over the debt. The debt becomes the chief pressure that the parents load on Toshio, despite his tenacious resistance and accusation of the unfairness of such imposition. Mother tries to persuade Toshio that “every child must repay his parents” (Murayama 30), yet she comes nowhere close to offering any definite terms to determine such debt children owe to their parents. The repeated hassles between Toshio and Mother never end with either part convinced. The family’s debt history is later disclosed by Mother: it is in actuality a burden levied on the parents by Grandfather Oyama, who has wept and *begged* them to pay off the debt for him. This *begging* gesture implies that it is reasonable and possible for the parents to refuse the debt. It becomes ironic when Mother immediately regrets her imprudence of telling the truth about the family debt. The fact of Mother’s revelation and later denial of this family history divulges that it is not a destined filial duty for Toshio to burden the debt for either his parents or Grandfather. Exaggerating the substantiality of the Japanese family values, the Oyama issei schematize to pass over the infeasible family duty to the nisei so as to eschew moral judgment. Accordingly, Sumida concludes that the “battle between generations...is about this version of the debt’s history—a self-serving and romanticized version,” not about a discrepancy between Japanese and American cultures (*And the View from the Shore* 130). For this reason, *All I Asking* should not be assumed as a work that stresses individual independence, or individualism, and thus not a work of assimilation because “it neither assumes nor promotes the idea that attaining success and happiness for the American-born Nisei requires submission to the rules and standards of a dominant ‘American’ culture” (Sumida, “*All I Asking for Is My Body*” 131).

The origin of the family debt can be traced back to Grandfather Oyama's failure in business. As the chains that continually attach the Oyamas to the Frontier Mill Plantation in Hawaii for generations, the debt and its institutionalization symbolize the dependency of Japanese laborers on the plantation system during the decades of 1910-1940, which was the second phase of Hawaii's anti-Japanese movement (Okiihiro, *Cane Fires* xiii). Murayama realistically displays the life on Hawaiian plantations, which can be crystallized as "fifteen minutes for breakfast, thirty minutes for lunch, *pau hana* at 2:30" (39). This personal testimony is concordant with historian Ronald Takaki's poetic account of the plantation life in Hawaii:

"Awake! stir your bones! Rouse up!"

Shrieks the Five o'Clock Whistle.

"Don't dream you can nestle

For one more sweet nap.

Or your ear-drums I'll rap

With my steam-hammer tap

Till they burst.

Br-r-row-aw-i-e-ur-ur-rup!

Wake up! wake up! wake up! w-a-k-e-u-u-u-up! (*Pau Hana* 57)

In order to pay off the debt, the Oyamas have to endure the planters' exploitation. It is the debt that expands the spectrum of Murayama's writing purpose that goes beyond the generational conflicts and meanwhile ridicules the assimilation theme. It is also the unbearable debt that perpetuates the capitalist system of Hawaii's plantations and thus illustrates the repercussion of plantation paternalism that penetrates into the daily lives of Japanese laborers<sup>20</sup>. The debt belies

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<sup>20</sup> Okiihiro records a historical case that exemplifies the plantation's perpetuation of their exploitation of the Asiatic laborers. His historiographical narrative describes a nineteen-year-old Korean woman who migrated to Hawaii with

the societal stratification whereas the fake family duty the debt is endowed with offers the most honors to analyses grounded in the observed traditions and traits of satire as produced by satire theorists.

But the purpose of Murayama's satire is not to laugh at the Japanese Americans in Hawaii. In fact, it is even hard for the reader to spot his satiric techniques because it seems not *right* to seek non-serious or lighthearted elements in works that are meant to expose the darkness of racially oppressed American society. To prove its satiric features by nature does not meet the needs of survival. However, survival is not paralleled with struggle. In Sau-ling Wong's diction that pigeonholes certain criteria of "survival" as the pretext of her definition of Necessity, survival is elastic (*Reading Asian American Literature* 44). The elastic feature of survival sometimes exhibits indifference, self-absorption, relatively purposelessness, and Alvin Kernan's "characteristic actions" of satire—"darkening, disordering, and preying" (Kernan 23; Ball 54). Without a coherent theme that requests a void of ambiguity and confrontation with a single type of ideology, *All I Asking* engages in a form of multidirectionality of survival fiction.

The non-linear characteristics of survival fiction reciprocally enable the recuperation of satire in Asian American literature. In addition to its satiric narrative of the Japanese values compromised by the Oyama issei, Murayama's organization of the novella has a structural compatibility with satire. John Ball writes, "[s]atiric writing often turns on the revelation of hierarchically evaluated gaps—between ideal and actual, reality and pretense, order and disorder" (59). *All I Asking*, which is set up during the sudden transition around the Attack on Pearl Harbor

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her family between 1903 and 1905. They were "sold" to Hawaii as laborers by signing a deceitful contract with HSPA. She explains their economic situation on the plantation: "If all of us [--including her mother, her two brothers, and her sister-in-law] worked hard and pooled together our total earnings, it came to about \$50.00 a month, barely enough to feed and clothe the five of us. We cooked on the porch, using coal oil and when we cooked in the fields, I gathered the wood. We had to carry water in vessels from water faucets scattered here and there in the camp area." Okihiro adds that to "supplement their income, the women sewed shirts for twenty-five cents and scrubbed, ironed, and mended clothes for five cents apiece" (*Margins and Mainstreams* 103).

during WWII, exposes the societal and mental chaos and disorder that are camouflaged by conflicts between the issei and the nissei, Japanese-borns and American-borns. Murayama writes as an inside eyewitness who does not fully pose as omniscient as a realist. The disconnection within the textual structure and the inconsistency of the characters are offered no explanation. Murayama's satire that hinges on his characters and the interactions between characters violates the harmony of the realist form and uncovers the truth of the characters' impotence in understanding and determining their own lives.

In order to comprehend the author's true object of satire, the reader has to look for information that contextualizes the novella because what determine the characters' decisions in life are not their free wills but the historical environment and social forces. Asian American historians have explicated the underlying effect of plantation paternalism in Hawaii on the formation of Japanese Hawaiian communities. Gary Okihiro observes that due to the high cost of European laborers, white planters had to face the prospect of filling their labor needs almost entirely from local supplies and cheap Asian migrant laborers (*Cane Fires* 39). Moreover, three correlated historical facts of racial oppression changed the demography of the Japanese Hawaiian labor population: firstly, the prevalent exclusion of Chinese on the U.S. West Coast since 1882 increased the demand for Japanese laborers as replacement; secondly, the 1907 Gentlemen Agreement between the U.S. and Japanese governments cut off further labor migration from Japan; lastly, the Japanese community, unlike the Filipino and Chinese ones, was able to establish complete families in Hawaii as there was no legal forbiddance of Japanese women's migration. As a result, local Japanese American laborers increased rapidly in the number of offspring and became the majority on Hawaiian plantations and adapted themselves to the local Hawaiian culture (Nomura 97). The majority of Asian—especially Japanese—laborers stipulated

a new approach for the planters to control over the workforce and ensure its permanence because “stability in the workforce was desirable” for the year-round activities on the plantations (Okiihiro, *Cane Fires* 61). Plantation paternalism for its “firmness with kindness” (Okiihiro, *Cane Fires* 39) became the ideal tool “to prevent laborers from leaving Hawaii for the mainland” (61). One of the paternalistic strategies was Americanization of Japanese laborers, which enabled Japanese laborers to generate political consciousness and advance economic demands.

Historian Moon-Kie Jung in his study of Hawaiian labor investigates in the procession of interracial organizations and reconceptualizes interracialism as “the ideology and practice of forming a political community across extant racial boundaries” (3). He points out that according to Yen Le Espiritu and Jonathan Okamura, “‘Asian American’ as a pan-ethnic racial category is a postwar and a continental U. S. construct that, to this day, enjoys little currency in Hawai‘i” (56), which explains why the Filipino and Japanese did not recognize each other as the same race. The separation between Japanese and Filipino laborers is showcased in the pyramid layout of the Frontier Mill Plantation: “At the tip was Mr. Nelson, then the Portuguese, Spanish, and nisei *lunas* in their nicer-looking homes, then the identical wooden frame houses of Japanese Camp, then the more run-down Filipino Camp” (Murayama 28). This pyramid structure of the plantation guarantees a breakdown of the two strikes held by the Japanese laborers in 1920 and 1922 and the one initiated by the Filipinos in 1937 respectively.

However, Murayama deliberately seeks to undercut conventional audience’s expectations of an ideological presentation of the two Japanese strikes; instead, he turns to the 1937 Filipino strike and provides a brief account of the interethnic conflicts between the Japanese and Filipino communities. During this strike, the Filipino laborers played the main role in wrestling with the planters for higher wages while the Japanese workers became the cat’s paw for the planters.

Father Oyama's revelation that the Japanese "went on strike in 1920 and 1922 and both times the others were the strikebreakers" (Murayama 36) illustrates a lack of cooperation between the two ethnic labor communities, which is the reason "why nobody can beat the plantation" (37). Historian Edward Beechert of Hawaiian labor history documents that the failure of the 1920 strike was partially attributed to a battle for leadership between the Japanese association and the less complex and well-planned Filipino organization led by Pablo Manlapit. The strikes ending with a failure signified more than interethnic dissonance; it also betrayed the hypocrisy of plantation paternalism—the double-faced firm and kind paternalism definitely leaned toward firmness. While humanity is addressed in plantation paternalism, the planters placed the laborers in a racial and class hierarchy (Takaki, *Pau Hana* 66). Racial division and class stratification reciprocate one another and are fortified under the double-faced plantation paternalism. Through paternalism that was designed to "maintain the caste and/class reality of plantation society" (Takaki, *Pau Hana* 66), planters showed concern for the nonwhite laborers' welfare and assumed a paternal role on the one hand; on the other, planters threw an iron fist administering the plantation in order to maintain the interethnic disharmony by shifting the conflict between capital and labor into the friction between ethnic communities as well as transmuting the political dissidence caused by severe racialization into generational conflicts between first- and second-generation immigrants. Racial tension is incarnated as the generation gap between the issei and nisei Oyamas. But the generational conflicts between them cannot be easily comprehended as an allegory that emblemizes the resistance of Japanese laborers against the plantation system if the nisei continue to perceive their parents as the racial Other.

In describing the interacted generation gap, racial conflicts, and class contradictions, Murayama does not provide a coherent criticism in his Pidgin English rife with satire. He

sometimes mocks at the nisei's ignorance of racial discrimination, sometimes snorts at the issei's self-deception of the Japanese invasion in China, or occasionally scoffs at the self-claimed universal solution offered by Communists and the likes. The ideological inconsistency exhibited in his continuous irony is not accidental: it is conformable to the narrator's persona as a teenager with knowledge deficiency and it is also Murayama's strategic maneuvering in staying true to the real experience of survival. Such experience features ambiguity, indifference to racial stratification, and sectarianism. Any revolutionary proposal that goes beyond their ethnic scope or challenges their expedient empirical strategy of survival will be likely discredited and reduced into impracticality, imprudence, and obtuseness. But this provinciality of immigrant "survivors" betokens the incompetency and inadequacy of the universal revolutionary concepts, such as Snooky's Communism, in dealing with the historical and social specificity faced by the racially oppressed.

When Snooky lectures against selfishness, racial division, and filial piety and calls for freedom, Kiyoshi responds that freedom means to become a plantation boss (Murayama 34). Commenting on Snooky, Toshio recognizes him as "a Communist or a queer" because "[n]ice *haoles* always after something else" (Murayama 36), which connotes that Communism like plantation paternalism is racialized pragmatism that maintains its silence on race issues. Kiyoshi's and Toshio's respective responses in effect satirize the impracticality of Communism for its neglect of racial conflicts on the plantations and its blind superimposition of class over race. Furthermore, Kiyoshi recalls Mr. Nelson's unexpected appearance in the classroom makes Snooky stumble into "dangling participles and grammar" (Murayama 34). Snooky's cowardice for fearing Mr. Nelson illustrates that Snooky, or his Communist idealism, remains inscribed "within the very problematic of the unfreedom and domination it attempts to overcome" (West

261). When Mr. Nelson is gone, Snooky soon resumes his repetitive idealistic narration about “primary virtues” (Murayama 35) that makes no sense to Kiyoshi. Beechert has reported the significance of Communist or socialist characters of the 1920 strike, which was partially attributed to the “traditional ‘outsider’ agitator—the old story of local people being misled by *malihini haoles* (newcomer whites)” (267). Followed by his insinuation of the divided—between radical and conservative—attitudes towards the strikes, Murayama disparages the influence of the white newcomers through his characterization of Snooky. The split attitudes towards Snooky are infiltrated through Murayama’s satire, which addresses the presence of *malihini haoles*’ effort in uniting the interethnic strikers as well as its generalizing, grand discourse regardless racial specificity that led to its failure. Therefore, the satiric narrative in the novella has gone through a disagreement with the form of a proletarian novel as Sumida suggested. But the question is: what is the “proletarian novel”?

Walter Rideout has done a good job in defining the proletarian—or radical—novel. A proletarian novel should demonstrate “either explicitly or implicitly, that its author objects to the human suffering imposed by some socioeconomic system and *advocates that the system be fundamentally changed*” (12; italics original). Frederick Hoffman extends Rideout’s definition and specifies three classes of proletarian novels: the strike novel, where “there is a ‘trajectory’ of movement and action ‘aptly designed for artistic expression’” (188); the conversion novel, of which “the hero becomes a drifter, moves almost without motive or incentive from place to place, becomes acquainted informally with Marxism, and ends by seeing himself clearly as a member of his class” (190); and finally the novel that “describes the decay and decline of the middle class” (191). Not only that *All I Asking* happens to fall into none of these categories, it fails to provision or propose a fundamental change to the plantation system in Hawaii.

Murayama's realistic portrayal of the class conflicts beefed up by interethnic division and discrimination that causes the strike to fail practices no technicality of a proletarian novel. When Kiyoshi is happy to make two dollars a day during the Filipino strike despite his own awareness that they are breaking the strike by accepting the offer, Murayama adroitly refers to the strikebreaking conjointly enabled by ethnic division and the planter's maneuver as "the last surviving vestige of feudalism in the United States" (33). But his intention is not to criticize the Japanese mugwumps' insularism. Snooky rationalizes his accusation of the Japanese strikebreakers' behavior in his attempt to arouse "conscience" (Murayama 33) among Japanese laborers and in his emphasis on the class solidarity. Reacting to Snooky's accusation, Kiyoshi and Tubby Takeshita express little sympathy with the Filipino strikers and show no awareness of the pecking order, in which "the plantation divides and rules, and...the exploited are perfectly happy to be divided and rules" (Murayama 33). Through the inconclusive argument between Snooky and the nisei, Murayama indicates that the idealized Communism or the class solidarity theory continues to mitigate the racial and ethnic problems and thus distances itself from the historical practicality of Hawaii. The brief conversation between Snooky and the Kiyoshis that centers on the strike receives no answers and ends in non-closure. Ergo, *All I Asking* is not a proletarian novel because it does not depict a trajectory of movement and action but suspiciously mocks at Communism and class theory that overlook the reality of interethnic conflicts, and obviously has no presence of any middle class issues, and hence barely a *Bildungsroman* that always addresses the middle class concerns. Undeniably, Murayama cognizes the problematic plantation system through the character of Kiyoshi:

I would have to get out and be on my own even if the old man was successful and he was doing me the favors, even if the plantation made me its highest *luna*. Freedom was

freedom from other people's shit, and shit was shit no matter how lovingly it was dished, how high or low it came from. Shit was the glue which held a group together, and I was going to have no part of any shit or any group. (96)

To get out or run away signals a non-solution for ethnic enclaves of the plantation system.

Murayama uses Kiyoshi's ventilation of his dissatisfaction with any ethnic or class community to demote the prominence of ethnicity and to convict any existent solution projected by the Western narratives, including Marxist theory, which, as "a system of a particular Western version of the will to truth and style of rationality that valorizes control, mastery and domination of nature and history" and the most dominant strain of thought of the American left in the fascinating moments of the 1970s (the book was published in 1973), "obscures and hides the ways in which secular ideologies—especially modern ideologies of scientism, racism and sexual hedonism...—are linked to larger civilizational ways of life and struggle" (West 262).

Staying true to realism and reinforcing the theme of survival, Murayama does not provide any abstract explanatory accounts for his criticism of the plantation system. He adapts satire as a strategy of survival to get out of the conundrum of committing to a Western logic of explicability. The dialogue around the family debt between Toshio and Mother where Toshio insists that "All I asking for is my body" (Murayama 57) is based on a tradition that remains unauthorized throughout the novel and satirized by the author because there is a possibility that the tradition of fulfilling such filial piety is faulty. As Sumida reminds the reader, the advantage of being an immigrant is that "one can establish as 'tradition' a practice only imperfectly remembered and understood, by one who left Japan while relatively young, with no elders around to make corrections" (*And the View from the Shore* 134). This tradition is not deprived of truth; instead, it is truth that can be neatly formulated. Though the so-called tradition insists on *chonan*'s

responsibility for the debt, due to Toshio's resistance, Mother has made a compromise and shifts the burden to Kiyoshi. By switching the family's burden from *chonnan* to *jinann*<sup>21</sup>, Murayama investigates a philosophical challenge to knowledge that is presumed to be true and thus questions the accepted orthodoxy and its antagonistic opposite simultaneously.

The potential of Murayama's satire points to truth, knowledge, and power. Foucault re-visions the relationship between power and truth:

[T]ruth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

Faithfully displaying the poorly educated nisei on the Hawaiian plantation, Murayama transmits their resistance against the truth and knowledge framed by the plantation system into the generational conflicts whereas the issei's passive resistance is reflected in their invention of Japanese traditions as they have no other ways to escape the perpetuated systemic exploitation by the planters. Asking the issei "How much? How long?" it would take for them to repay their parents (Murayama 57), the nisei expose the hypocrisy of plantation paternalism since under the mask of mercy, the plantation offers them no means to pay off the family's life debt.

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<sup>21</sup> *Jinann* means the second son in a Japanese household.

In the end of the book Murayama's satire reaches its ultimatum. It demands no extra effort for the reader to find out that the conventional satirist's production "contains a strong element of playfulness and fun" (Clark 53); yet, in his pages, Murayama impresses the reader more with dreadful earnest and a sense of quandary than coltishness. This sense of uncertainty is enhanced by the historical event of Japan's invasion. By bringing war to American soil and becoming the real enemy of the U.S., Japan accidentally and ironically helps Kiyoshi get away from the Hawaiian plantation society and thus obtain his freedom<sup>22</sup>. Kiyoshi's enlistment in the army to fight against Japan indirectly enables him to make enough money through gambling and pay off the debt. Meanwhile, the prima facie harmony in the closing of the book becomes legitimately undone by Kiyoshi's enlistment, which literally renders his fate unpredictable. Toshio's ultimate fulfillment of his filial piety—though he does not pay off the debt himself, he stays on the plantation, marries a good Japanese girl, and fosters the Oyamas with a third of his income and all of his wife's annual paycheck (Murayama 88)—discords with his own disbelief in loyalty to one's parents<sup>23</sup>. Satire, once again, is adopted to solve the unsolvable problem for the Oyama parents, who claim to live for the Japanese values but are finally saved by what is detested by Japanese traditions—gambling. When Kiyoshi *delightfully* announces in his letter to Toshio, "Take care the body. See you after the War" (103), Murayama not only leaves the ending unsettled and waiting for its sequel but also implies a potential satire on the nisei who were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to their home country by fighting against the enemy race. In his vivid language, Kyle Kajihiro describes the war as "the theatre in which the nisei redeemed themselves in a grand morality play, where individuals from an oppressed group could

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<sup>22</sup> I shall thank Professor Shawn Wong for his input on this front.

<sup>23</sup> Satire arises again in the issei's imposition of filial piety on their children: filial piety is considered to be one of the Confucian virtues. But the Oyamas have converted to Methodism. The fact that their self-claimed religion fails to restrain their daily lives and collides with their mundane beliefs signifies their ambiguity as Japanese Americans and reveals that their conversion is simply a coping mechanism of survival.

overcome racial discrimination by demonstrating unquestioning loyalty to the United States and making enormous personal and collective sacrifices” that consequently facilitated the U.S. military’s transformation of Hawaii’s Japanese into “Japanese Americans” (173). Embracing and celebrating their freedom, the nisei like Kiyoshi could not vaticinate that three months later, the successfully *transformed* Japanese Americans were suspected of loyalty and interrogated by the Federal Government<sup>24</sup>, which determined their fate during WWII and created an undying national trauma on the racialized U.S. history. The open-endedness of narrative satire offers no clear solution and points to the conventional nature of literary form, which in the case of *All I Asking for Is My Body* is social realism. This characteristic of satire in this novella hints at a vicious circle that allows the continuation and perpetuation of the capitalist exploitation of the plantation laborers. The contentious open-ending leaves “meaning indefinite and suspend[s] the reader uncomfortably between alternate and opposed interpretations of the work” (Palmeri, *Satire in Narrative* 5).

Palmeri maintains that “narrative satires lead repeatedly to the conclusion that no system of explanation, whether religious, scientific, or economic, can provide a satisfactory account of the world, however absolute it claims” (*Satire in Narrative* 12). The narrative satire in Murayama’s novella truthfully presents interethnic conflicts, voices the voiceless class, signals

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<sup>24</sup> William Petersen records that “Hawaii Japanese in World War II were spared the injustices inflicted upon mainland Japanese Americans. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, there were, inevitably, allegations that they had sabotaged the defenses there. These rumors were investigated in full four times over—by Honolulu’s chief of police, by the Secretary of War, by the director of the F.B.I and, finally and most completely, by John A. Burns, [the second] Governor of Hawaii [from 1962 to 1974] and then a Honolulu police lieutenant in charge of counter-espionage and a liaison officer with military intelligence—and proved completely false. But the lesson of this quadruple vindication was lost in the morass of mainland racial prejudice” (33). The mainland Japanese Americans received consequential investigations and put into internment camps all over Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Utah. Two loyalty questions were asked during the investigation, the main function of which was to measure the loyalty of the Japanese:

Question no. 27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?

Question no. 28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of American and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power, or organization?” (Weglyn 136; Sumida, “Japanese American Moral Dilemmas” 225)

the unawareness of the majority of Japanese community of the institutionalized repression, queries the value system of the false authority, and offers no real solution to all the problems raised throughout the course, and thus serves as well as alerts the reader to the survival theme and its periodic limitation. It is one of the first few steps Asian American writers take as a continuing process of unsettling hierarchies of value and knowledge.

## Chapter Two

### Transformation Fiction: A Negotiation with the Bildungsroman

#### *I. The Historical Background: the Emergence of Model Minorities*

The 1960s witnessed two historical moments: Asian American subjects' transformation in the mainstream public perception from enemy aliens or sojourners to model minorities; and the enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. In January 1966, William Petersen, a social demographer, first articulated the model minority thesis in his article, "Success Story, Japanese American Style," published in the *New York Times Magazine*. With his accurate data, Petersen describes Japanese Americans as practical, materialistic, and "exceptionally law-abiding alien residents" (21), mainly in comparison with whites and blacks. His relative advancement in the social theory of American ethnicities should be recognized, but on the other hand it denies Japanese Americans their cultural citizenship that claims America when Petersen attributes their success to the Japanese Americans' intimate and "meaningful links with an alien culture" (43). This racial profiling activity was soon picked up and carried on by the mainstream American media, followed by the public society. Later in the same year, *U.S. News and World Report* features a corresponsive article, "Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.," which, focusing their lenses on San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York Chinatowns and describing the Chinese Americans as "moving ahead by applying the traditional virtues of hard work, thrift, and morality" (74), confirms the rationale behind the concept of model minorities. Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans became the reputational representatives of model minorities for their "high educational achievement levels, high median family incomes, low crime rates, and the absence of juvenile delinquency and mental health problems" (Palumbo-Liu, "Modelling the Nation" 217). The model iconography of Japanese Americans and Chinese

Americans continued to circulate in the public press as well as in American society till the 1970s<sup>1</sup>. The near-a-decade reinforcement of the model minority thesis successfully generated the myth of Asian American subject trans/formation that was based upon an assumption shifted from an accusation of their inability to assimilate towards an implied repute that they were assimilated too well.

While the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, abolished the national origins quota system that had shaped American immigration policy since the Immigration Act of 1924, it simultaneously advanced the validity of projecting Asian Americans as model minorities. Allowing for an annual quota of 20,000 immigrants from each Asian country, the 1965 immigration acts facilitated a radical demographic change that “has transformed the group from a predominantly American-born constituency to a group which is 65% foreign-born” (Koshy 322). Unlike the ancestors of American-born Asians, foreign-born Asian immigrants consist of a large number of middle-class professionals, mainly from East Asia, and thus enhanced the class stratification within Asian American communities. These well-educated immigrants are eager to expect the best education that money can buy for their children and ensure an access to social mobility. Therefore, the elite East Coast higher education institutions were challenged by an increasing number of applications from high school students of Asian-ancestry. What has been brought up to attention by the arrival of new immigrants is not simply the escalated class differences and tension. Sucheng Chan has bespoken her concerns about a descending subject formation crisis due to the metamorphic demographic pattern of Asian American communities: since these new immigrants

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<sup>1</sup> Ki-Taek Chun and his co-workers in the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights have offered a circumstantial sociological report on the mystification of model minorities prior to 1980.

had not been “minorities” in their natal countries, some of them apparently feel uncomfortable about being placed into a “minority” slot in American society. One convenient way to avoid such a racialized identity is to insist that they are a part of various Asian diasporas and that they have diasporic or transnational identities. That is, they intentionally *disidentify* with the country in which they now live and earn a living. (*In Defense of Asian American Studies* 188)

Upon objurgating new immigrants’ effect on the formation of Asian American communities, Chan proposes to resume the “Enlightenment project” of Asian American subject formation. Instead of kicking “the ‘nationalist’ moorings from under ourselves,” Chan calls upon Asian American scholars to renew or sharpen this most basic tool of Asian American self-identification so as to secure their survival and strengthen their agency as American minorities by making “claims on the United States because we [Asian Americans] insisted we are Americans” (*In Defense of Asian American Studies* 196-197)<sup>2</sup>.

New immigrants’ rejection of Asian American nationalism does not single-handedly cause the disintegration of the idealistic pan-ethnic identity as Asian Americans. The neoconservative project of re-visioning Asian Americans as model subjects, who practice work ethics, individualism, self-reliance, discipline, etc., be them American-born or foreign-born, homogenizes different classes of Asian Americans on the one hand, and on the other, intentionally divides “working people pitting one racial group against the others, in order to displace systemic contradictions” (San Juan, Jr., “Multiculturalism vs. Hegemony” 470). Despite

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<sup>2</sup> Sucheng Chan’s forceful revolutionist argument seems to have shared the same logic with the two loyalty questions imposed upon Japanese Americans during WWII: while Japanese Americans during WWII were forced to choose between Japan and America, Chan’s accusation coerces new immigrants to decide between Asia and America in order to be considered for Asian American subject formation. New immigrants, who do not participate in the same historical progress as the American-born Asians and thus claim a diasporic self-identification, in Chan’s argument, become the “Other” in the Asian American discourse.

the antipodal attitudes toward Asian American subject formation, the phenomenon of class differences within Asian American communities and celebrations of the success stories of Asian Americans are inevitably presented in Asian American literary publications. More publication opportunities became available to Asian American writers in the 1970s because of a rising sensitivity to “the presence of minorities, both as producers and consumers of culture” (S. Lim 154). Shirley G-L. Lim in particular noticed that “[t]he publication of three Asian American collections between 1972 and 1975”—*Asian-American Author* (1972) edited by Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas; *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry* (1974) edited by David Hsin-Fu Wand, and the most acknowledged *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong—“coincided with the sudden demographic presence of Asians in the United States, a presence made more marked by the perceived economic, educational, and professional success of that minority group” (154). The shift in the publishing and public space prepared Asian American writers with a major concern of the mainstream American audience outside of Asian American enclaves. How to portray their images and situate their histories in American national discourses became the prime subject matter in their narratives.

The nationwide mystification of model minorities attracts Asian Americanists’ attention. David Palumbo-Liu argues that being “upgraded” to model minorities does not equally de-marginalize Asian Americans: the mutual exclusiveness between *Asian* and *American* is verified in the conception of model minorities that Asian Americans become model minorities because of their Asianness, not Americanness. Asian American critics believe that the model minority myth was used to address to other racial minorities who were not as economically successful as Japanese and Chinese Americans and at the same time to white Americans, “who were seen to

have lost the guiding ethical principles of America” (Palumbo-Liu, “Modelling the Nation” 214), with a salutary and didactic purpose of inspiring the national spirit and reinvigorating the national strength. Assuming that the very forces of keeping Japanese Americans from being dragged to the weakening state of the “young America” spirit was their Japanese attributes, the genesis of such a myth draws no distinct lines between Asians and Asian Americans. Therefore, there are only two possibilities left for Japanese Americans in the process of assimilation: they either become Asianized and thus inassimilable or grow Americanized and lose their “modeling function” (Palumbo-Liu, “Modelling the Nation” 217). Either way, the Asian American subject remains perpetually self-isolated and marginalized.

In spite of such criticism of the model minority thesis, the triumphant assimilation is readily articulated and propagandized by Asian American writers two-to-three decades ago. As compared to the pre-1965 era when Asian Americans were mostly invisible in the American general culture, the post-1965 era testified to the emergence of the homogenous identification of Asian America and its gradual visibility in the U.S. cultural production. Asian American writers not only record this transition, but also reflect on the repercussions of the ideological project launched by the U.S. racial politics of modeling Asian Americans through delineating a success story that demonstrates their assimilation and acculturation. Asian American writers who published on the transformative phase of Asian American subjects can be generally divided into two types: those, including anti-assimilationists, who celebrate Asian Americans’ economic and political successes in the plot development without necessarily being cognizant of the implied racial profiling strategy; and those who provide a retrospective exhibition of the collective memory of the U.S. national racialization and question the nationwide efficacy of modeling Asian Americans. In order to talk up or cogitate on the success story of Asian Americans, both

groups of Asian American writers operate within the code of the Bildungsroman that attends to the subject formation and transformation.

Before I take the next step to explain my terminology of transformation fiction, I beg the reader to be patient with my detour from it around the Bildungsroman subgenre. The reason is twofold. For one thing, Asian American “transformation” features subject formation that stresses Asian American subjects’ assumption of social consciousness of the nation’s racialization project. While in survival fictions subject formation is external to the empirical basis for Asian American writers’ literary production, in transformation novels it is internal, inherent, and thematic. Subject formation is at some point considered exchangeable with the concept of Bildungsroman (Chu 6). The existent novels that concentrate on Asian American subject formation are usually categorized by the critical particularities of the Bildungsroman. The Bildungsroman is generally accepted by literary critics as to enable its application in ethnic American literatures for the reason that as a genre on subject formation, the Bildungsroman is a useful tool for channeling ethnic nationalism (Japtok 11), which is the driving force of ethnic literature. Certain Asian American novels, such as *No-No Boy* by John Okada, *America Is in the Heart* by Carlos Bulosan, and *Donald Duk* by Frank Chin, have been examined and critiqued as typical Asian American Bildungsromane<sup>3</sup>. The second reason of my deviation is that the transformation theme shares such common grounds with the Bildungsroman genre that it is only through a full discussion of the latter can I convey a complete message of the former. The examination of the Bildungsroman is a premise that necessitates the implication of theorizing the transformation component in the Asian American fictions of subject formation.

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<sup>3</sup> Both Patricia Chu and Lisa Lowe have contributed to such an inquiry. Chu explicitly calls *Donald Duk* a “utopian bildungsroman” of Frank Chin’s (199 n.46). Lowe traces *America Is in the Heart* so as to exemplify the pattern of the bildungsroman narrative that “narrates the protagonist’s development from the uncertainty, locality, and impotence of ‘youth’ to the definition, mobility, and potency of ‘maturity’” (*Immigrant Acts* 45).

## *II. Is the Bildungsroman Dead?*

Disciplinarily granted as ethnic literature, Asian American literature follows a similar—though not coterminous—trajectory as African American and Jewish American literatures do: they proceeded with autobiographies and Bildungsromans for the reason that these two subgenres “are forms that flourish in unstable times” and the European and Anglo American literary forms are what ethnic writers are mostly acquainted with (Japtok 24). James Hardin indicates that the popular form of English fiction that arose in the last third of the eighteenth century was usually autobiographical, “principally concerned with the spiritual and psychological development of the protagonist, that is known as the Bildungsroman” (Introduction ix). The definition of the Bildungsroman varies in terms of its ideological extent. Hardin complains that the concept of the Bildungsroman has been used by literary critics in “a loose, casual, arbitrary, or undifferentiated manner” (Introduction xi). He defines the Bildungsroman based on two relevant meanings of the original *Bildung* in German: “first, *Bildung* as a developmental process and, second, as a collective name for the cultural and spiritual values of a specific people or social stratum in a given historical epoch and by extension the achievement of learning about that same body of knowledge and acceptance of the value system it implies” (Introduction xi-xii). Germanist Wilhelm Dilthey, who inaugurated the “*Wilhelm Meister* school” by designating certain novels Bildungsromane, gives the Bildungsroman a definition in proficiency: “the theme of the Bildungsroman is the history of a young man ‘who enters into life in a blissful state of ignorance, seeks related souls, experiences friendship and love, struggles with the hard realities of the world and thus armed with a variety

of experiences, matures, finds himself and his mission in the world” (qtd. in Hardin, Introduction xiv).

Dilthey’s definition is denounced for being too limited and even sexist. In spite of the rising criticism of such a narrow definition, Hardin refers the significance of the Bildungsroman subgenre to “a historical phenomenon whose time has passed” (Introduction xiv). Borrowing Lukács’s interpretation of the epic poem that the writer is not alienated from the outside society, Hardin consents that in the genre of prose fiction, both protagonists and writers are looking for a lost meaning of life or a severed bond with the world. The relationship between the writer and the world determines the two opposing types of the novel: that of abstract idealism and that of disillusion and reflection (Introduction xv). The Bildungsroman is placed between these two types; thus the central theme of the Bildungsroman is “the reconciliation of the problematic individual driven by deeply-felt ideals with concrete social realities” (Jacobs and Krause 27; qtd. in Hardin, Introduction xvi).

However, severe Germanists are not so generous in giving up their legacy of the Bildungsroman to other literatures. They defend the Bildungsroman by confining it to the age of German Classicism and the ideology whereof. Some suggest that the Bildungsroman should be replaced by a more precise, less ideological concept. Hardin points out that these scholars are few whereas a majority of literary scholars still view the Bildungsroman as “a supranational literary type” (Introduction xxiii), though national variants certainly exist. For example, recent theory on the Bildungsroman has suggested three geography-based types of Bildungsroman: spiritual apprenticeship as in the classical German tradition, social conformity as in the English tradition, and artistic success as in the French tradition (Castle 8). Considered revolutionary, the

French and English traditions revitalize the “full potential [of the Bildungsroman] as a pragmatic ideological discourse” (Castle 13).

One of the most inspirational but provocative scholars on the Bildungsroman theory is Franco Moretti. In spite of Hardin’s dismissal of his examination of the Bildungsroman, in particular of his imprudent usage of the word “classical” to frame his study of this subgenre<sup>4</sup>, Moretti has attempted to abstract and expand the usage of this concept by registering a code of symbolism to its conception. Instead of being restrained to physical youth, the Bildungsroman in Moretti’s discussion matures into a symbolic narrative and thus is granted with supranationality. The contribution of Moretti’s study to the scholarship, however, does not lie in his concentration on the symbolized youth, but in his equation of *youth* with *modernity*<sup>5</sup>. Moretti postulates the transition of the Bildungsroman from its emergence in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* to its final disappearance after Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* due to its historical limitation as a narrative form; because “youth does not last forever” (Moretti, *The Way of the World* 6), the symbolic form of youth will eventually reach its exhaustion. This symbolic gesture of the Bildungsroman renders itself impossible to proceed to modernism, at least according to Moretti. Therefore, realism becomes the perfect domain to draft the Bildungsroman as they both entail a conclusive and suggestive ending.

In order to complete the process of maturation, interiorization of the internal contradiction between the protagonists and society at large must be enabled and legitimized. That

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<sup>4</sup> In his compact review (less than one page) of Moretti’s book, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, James Hardin’s criticism of Moretti is threefold: 1) He dismisses Moretti’s repetition of the concept of the “classical *Bildungsroman*” without ever questioning the existence of such a usage; 2) He disproves Moretti’s simplification of such a complex and difficult concept as *Bildungsroman* by ignoring the entire of its sophistication; 3) He reproaches Moretti for the “somewhat disorganized and diffuse” structure of his book, to which I happen to agree.

<sup>5</sup> James Hardin certainly has touched upon and indicated such an association; but his argument was published after Moretti’s monograph that contains this equation.

the *Bildungshelden*<sup>6</sup> must be at odds with society stems from a historical cleavage: the subject is a modern being while society has yet to develop into a modern society. The sign of youth resembles modernity; youth is full of great expectations and thus mobility, and modernity is “‘a permanent revolution’ that perceives the experience piled up in tradition as a useless dead-weight, and therefore no longer feel represented by maturity, and still less by old age” (Moretti, *The Way of the World* 5). The *Bildungshelden* trespasses or goes beyond the social norms. The contradiction between the individual’s idiosyncrasies and the collective ideologies or beliefs must be attended and solved in order for the education to succeed. The nature of the *Bildungsroman* is thus determined to be synthetic and compromising. Depending on the extent of education, Moretti provides two principles that identify the narrative strategies used in variant *Bildungsromans*: the classification principle and the transformation one express antithetical attitudes towards modernity and youth. In the *Bildungsroman* that adopts the classification principle—Moretti names this type of *Bildungsroman* *classical*, youth is subordinated to maturity. The *Bildungshelden* must suppress itself to conform to social norms that demand stability. The classical *Bildungsroman* concludes with a happy ending. Happiness is posited by Moretti as the highest value of the classical *Bildungsroman*, “but only to the detriment and eventual annulment of freedom” (*The Way of the World* 8). When an unhappy ending occurs, such as in Stendal’s *The Red and the Black*, the classical *Bildungsroman* starts to face its own “death,” sometimes alongside the death of the young protagonist. Youth, in the *Bildungsroman* with an unhappy ending, desists from being treated as “a teleological course ending in a superior maturity; the meaning immanent to the world as it is can neither be shared by the protagonist nor grant him happiness; the strain towards autonomy clashes with the dictates of socialization” (Moretti, *The Way of the World* 118). The fundamental form of the *Bildungsroman* has been

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<sup>6</sup> A *Bildungshelden* is the hero or protagonist of the *Bildungsroman*.

changed historically and withered away with Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* in 1848, and with the 1930s' English literature exemplified by George Eliot's *Felix Hotl* and *Middlemarch*.

Therefore, after the classification principle, the transformation principle prevailed and sped up the death of the Bildungsroman.

When death—the unhappy ending of the Bildungsroman—becomes arbitrary and necessary, the reality reflected in such an ending is divided and the faith in the ultimate harmony between the Bildungshelden and society cannot be obtained even through interiorization of contradictions. In other words, the Bildungsroman fails to diminish the modern self and at the same time, society is challenged by modernity and transformation whereof. The modern self in its effort of self-formation discovers eventually that the norm itself has been altered. A lack of the norm prevents the self from being socially formed and assimilated; as a result, the self is split in half just as the new reality of society “is based on their division” (Moretti, *The Way of the World* 120). In the transformation principle of the Bildungsroman, the very notions of experience and maturation as put forward by the classical Bildungsroman disappear, “as formative encounter with reality, assimilation of the new, incessant reorganization of a developing personality” (93). The central illusion of the Bildungsroman that the societal progress and the subject's growth can be paralleled processes is dismantled in the transformation principle of the Bildungsroman, such as in Balzac's works. In modern times that witness the development of capitalism, youth and money together become the goal of society and its subjects. Money helps youth to impose individual desires on the core of society. The typical bourgeois idea of youth considers youth “as a boundless field of possibility...paradoxically results in the overturning of its function: rather than *a preparation for something else*, it becomes *a value in itself*” (177;

emphases original). It is in modern times when both youth and society compromise and co-exist in harmony. But wherever the value of youth prevails dies the Bildungsroman.

The theme of youth has been centered on by many a scholar, such as Jerome Buckley, who adopts the label of Bildungsroman as “a convenient synonym for the novel of youth or apprenticeship” (13) and thus expands its usage with few restraints. Jeffrey Sammons criticizes Buckley for his treatment of the concept of the Bildungsroman as “a storage bin” (36). Detecting that Buckley has no affinity to the classical Bildungsroman exemplified by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, Sammons defensively acclaims that “to deny oneself access to it by measuring it against evaluative canons with which it has nothing to do and then appropriate the literary-historical term largely flowing from it seems more than a little arrogantly provincial” (36). Intolerant of a far-flung, imprudent utilization of the Bildungsroman subgenre, Sammons offers a clarified, detailed, non-Germanics-restrained perception of this label with some specific, necessary and rudimentary denominators:

[T]he Bildungsroman should have something to do with *Bildung*, that is, with the early bourgeois, humanistic concept of the shaping of the individual self from its innate potentialities through *acculturation* and social experience to the threshold of maturity. The concept arises at the moment when German thought began to become preeminent in Western culture, and it came to be of great historical resonance, underlying, for example, the principle of liberal education in American education, even if that principle is honored more in ceremonious academic rhetoric than in educational practice. A novel designated as a Bildungsroman should...be in some degree in contact with this concept. It does not much matter whether the process of *Bildung* succeeds or fails, whether the protagonist achieves an accommodation with life and society or not. ...But *Bildung* is not merely the

accumulation of experience, *not merely maturation in the form of fictional biography.*

There must be a sense of evolutionary change within the self, a teleology of individuality, *even if the novel, as many do, comes to doubt or deny the possibility of achieving a gratifying result.* (41; emphases mine)

Sammons's definition liberates the Bildungsroman from Moretti's division between the classification and transformation principles, abnegates Moretti's announcement of the death of the Bildungsroman, and installs a different form other than realism in this subgenre. In other words, in Sammons's theory, the Bildungsroman comes back to life even though youth is no longer in conflict with society.

While Sammons uncages the Bildungsroman from its realist confinement, Patricia Alden frees the Bildungsroman from its German seizure by differentiating the English Bildungsroman from its German counterpart. The original German version grapples with the contradiction between individuals and society, sometimes with "pervasive pessimism of modern literature" that is deprived of a happy ending (Hardin, Introduction xx). The English version, however, is fully aware of the class stratification and social advancement enabled by class mobility. Though Pierre Coustillas critiques that social mobility in the English Bildungsroman turns out to be intermittent rather than continuous and Richard Benvenuto regards Alden's treatment of the history and genre of the Bildungsroman "perfunctory" (Benvenuto 261), Alden translates this German literary phenomenon into English and therefore legitimizes a transition of the Bildungsroman from the German ideological territory to a cosmopolitan, international domain. Focusing on social mobility, Alden installs the "bourgeois" ideology into the core of the English Bildungsroman. In her sociological reading of Gissing's *Born in Exile* (1892), Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1896), Bennett's *Clayhanger* (1910), and Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and *The*

*Rainbow* (1915), Alden emphasizes that by articulating the interests and values of the rising bourgeoisie, portraying the characters' struggles to reach a state of internal harmony, and promulgating the ultimate goal of social advancement, the English Bildungsroman posits the bourgeois ideology as "to make us see ourselves 'as free, unified, autonomous, self-generating individuals'" (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 120; Alden 130). The shift from the spiritual romanticism in the German tradition to the pragmatic realism in the English tradition expands the applicability of the Bildungsroman in the literary history. The contradictions between individuals and society are no longer confined to a certain sacred ideology that pursues harmony, but become a more mundane and inherent *self-doubt*. Alden further explains that a sense of loss unfolds in the rising of the self in society because the upward movement does not equally lead to the spiritual development of the self. Rather, the advancement in society necessitates a betrayal of "the past, the community of one's roots, the innocent self" (Alden 4). The "double bind" of the protagonists in the English Bildungsroman leads to self-disintegration, "a complete rupture between self and society" (Alden 4). In the English tradition, the Bildungsroman ceases to close with satisfaction, happiness, or fulfillment; instead, it perpetuates the self-conflict and thus suggests a disclosure, which enables modernism to take over this tradition.

Gregory Castle joined in the debate over the applicability of the Bildungsroman after Jeffrey Sammons and Patricia Alden. If Sammons is a tad reserved about his defense of the concept, Castle is less laconic about his opinion that the Bildungsroman is not only alive but vigorous on the turf of modernism. Reflecting on Moretti's death sentence of the Bildungsroman for its insufficiency to fulfill the requirement of modernity, Castle extends its life expectancy by embarking on the modernist domain. Basing his argument on Moretti's reference to the symbolic legitimization of the Bildungsroman, Castle undoes the *closure* of the classical Bildungsroman that

serves Moretti's central argument. With his focus on English modernism, Castle speaks of "a resurgence and rehabilitation of Bildung grounded in an immanent critique of the Bildungsroman and its totalizing dialectical processes" (26). Castle contends that the term "modernity" does not declare the death of the Bildungsroman, but revives and evolves it.

In his study of English and Irish modernist fictions, Castle rectifies a possibility that happens to misunderstand a recuperation of the Bildungsroman as a *return* to this subgenre. The recapture of the Bildungsroman in the modernist fiction is not an "innocent" return with no alteration to "a Humboldtian concept of self-development—a harmonious dialectical relationship in which the subject's interests coincide with the state's—nor to the kind of pragmatic socialization narrated in the nineteenth century Bildungsroman" (Castle 67). Castle makes his point through his inquiry of identity politics. The subject formation of the self is changed alongside the emergence and dominance of modernity. Whereas the pre-modern era demands a social and moral improvement of the social subjects, modern times, which feature "the dominance of industrial capitalism, the development of nation-states, the rise of bureaucracies, the instrumentalization of reason, and the requirement of universal literacy" (Castle 32), produce and create arbitrary closures for the self in grand narratives that engender "communities of identifications" (Hall, "Minimal Selves" 117), that is, nations, ethnic groups, families, and genders. As a consequence of the society's increasing involvement with state-sponsored capitalism and private industries of the modern nation-state, an impasse becomes inevitable to the individual growth and the symbolic youth has no need or access to harmonious synthesis with the social order, as the classical Bildungsroman has claimed; rather, what is necessitated in modern times is "a complaisant but productive individual who could perform specific functions

and could be replaced by another individual from the trainable masses that constituted modern industrial societies” (Castle 47).

In addition, Castle argues that the trend of social mobility specified in the English tradition of *Bildungsroman* is not as solid as it looks. The upward mobility is not limitless; the so-called social mobility is still restrained to certain classes and occurs less frequently to the lower-middle and working classes. The restriction of social mobility, on the one hand, encumbers the ideal imagination of the harmony between society and its subjects in the *Bildungsroman*; on the other, it reveals the destiny of the *Bildungsroman* when facing up to modernity. To deal with the newly-conditioned, vexed relationship between society and its subjects, the modernist *Bildungsroman* “encourages the emergence of new conceptions of self-formation concerned with evading and resisting socialization, with disharmonious social spheres, or with hybrid, ambivalent, sometimes traumatic processes of identity formation” (Castle 64) for the reason that the happiness of harmonious synthesis, which used to work out in the pre-modern society, appears to be a weary past and guarantees little wonder in modern times. The currently defined improvement of human species is a critique of individual subordination to the totalizing tendency of the industrial modern society and of the depersonalization of rationalized institutions, as well as a rejection of the “binomial opposition success/failure, because the social conditions in which success and failure make sense are themselves foreclosed” (Castle 71). Therefore, the *Bildungsroman* does not die out with the vanishing of the pre-capitalist era; it is transformed from a statement into a critique of the “modes of closure” while offering “alternatives that are open and fluid,” and the aesthetic dialectics shift its focus from harmony to resistance (Castle 72).

### III. *Go Ethnic: Bildungsroman or Transformation*<sup>7</sup>?

Be it dead or alive, realist or modernist, German or English, in defiance of all the dissimilarities, the above paradigms and debate share one single truth: the protagonist of the Bildungsroman is never a racial minority. The term *Asian American Bildungsroman* seems loose as Asian American literature has no distinct prototype equivalent to the Bildungsroman created in the European tradition. The rest of the Western literatures have joyfully and dexterously adapted the philosophical concept of *Bildung* that inspired the eighteen-century German intellectuals to their own national ideologies, as aforementioned. The concept itself as ideologically limited is also literarily confined to

a philosophy in which the notion of the individual ranks supreme. The “self” is the individual’s means of perfecting society, for the cultivated individual contributes to advances in art, law, and religion. Basically, *Bildung* celebrates a humanistic vision of life. As an educational tenet, it stresses the development and refinement of a youth’s varied interests—secular, social, religious, spiritual—to produce an adult who, although fairly self-content and productive, finds even greater satisfaction in seeking further self-improvement. (Manos 19)

According to Nikki L. Manos’s clarification of *Bildung*, its application is carefully circumscribed on a one-way street of *upward advancement*, physical or mental. Asian American Bildungsroman—no matter what it means—does not guarantee this movement. The closure and reconciliation in the prototypical Bildungsroman are interrupted and disrupted in Asian American literature, which is obscured in the Western historical narratives. The racially *pure*, color-blind Bildungsroman that confines literature to individuated subjects and guarantees social

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<sup>7</sup> To clarify my naming rationale of the secondary category of Asian American fiction, I do not borrow it from Moretti’s classification and transformation principles. It is more coincidental than intentional.

mobility is thus a limited form for Asian American literature; though the Bildungsroman has become supranational, it is never claimed to be supra-racial. The narrow application of the Bildungsroman ought to be modified in order to voice the requirement of Asian American maturity since such maturity does not comply with the social norms that are generated within the white-dominated national ideology.

Undeniably, the Bildungsroman is a progressive step in the Western literary history for its social signification, even in Asian American literary history. First of all, it narrates a dream that “one’s identity is to be created, and not ‘inherited’” (Moretti, *The Way of the World* 214) and ends on a note of such dreams being fulfilled. The imposition of “the familiar, ostensibly depoliticized” (Chu 16) personal growth in the Bildungsroman is broadly favored by Asian Americanists to examine the subject formation in Asian American literature and culture. The coming-of-age fiction through a portrayal of adolescent protagonists became a handy tool for early Asian American writers as “a repertoire of representational conventions that purport to transcend such political differences while providing an idiom for addressing them indirectly” (Chu 16). Secondly, before the interference of modern literary theories, such as postcolonialism and feminism, Asian American literature must embrace the most familiar “frame of reference accessible and acceptable to ‘mainstream’ Americans or accept a smaller audience and continued invisibility” (Chu 16). Under the appearance of apoliticality and appealing to the market profitability, the Asian American Bildungsroman projects outspoken Americanized Bildungshelden and concentrates its thesis on cultural nationalism that claims America.

A feminist revision of the Bildungsroman waged a battle for politicizing this subgenre and thus fashioned it for Asian Americanists’ political agenda. Women writers and critics have in particular contributed to the development of the modern Bildungsroman through their

declaration that the Bildungsroman should not be exclusively a “masculinist, militaristic, working-class fashion” (Sohn, et. al. 2). For example, Bonnie H. Braendlin’s study of ethnic women writers also criticizes the death sentence of the Bildungsroman by male critics and writers. The death sentence, or anti-Bildungsroman, which “denies the individual’s ability to achieve any sense of personal identity and worth in an era of alienation from the society whose values in former times might have confirmed selfhood” (Braendlin 75), is plainly masculine, patriarchal, and white. Nonetheless, the new Bildungsroman of the disenfranchised Americans in the sense of gender and race revalues and transvalues the traditions of the old Bildung with new standards and perspectives through its portrayal of “the particular identity and adjustment problems of people whose sex or color renders them unacceptable to the dominant society” and “their struggle for individuation and a part in the American dream, which society simultaneously proffers and denies to them” (Braendlin 75).

Following the feminist movement of revitalizing the Bildungsroman, Asian Americanists initiated their substantial criticism of it as well. Jennifer Ho reforms the validity of *society* and its representational values in the Asian American Bildungsroman. She argues that the Asian American protagonist’s reconciliation is achieved not with the Euro-American society, but with “his/her home (symbolized most often through his/her Asian-ethnic family) and his/her Asian-ethnic American identity” (Ho 9). Lisa Lowe purports that the Bildungsroman possesses a special status in the Western formation of ideology because it “elicits the reader’s identification with the bildung narrative of ethical formation, itself a narrative of the individual’s relinquishing of particularity and difference through identification with an idealized ‘national’ form of subjectivity” (*Immigrant Acts* 98). Shedding the mask of hypocrisy behind which the

Bildungsroman is hidden, Lowe minds the reader that simply reading Asian American literature as a deviation of the Western Bildungsroman

surbordinates Asian American culture in several significant ways: not only does the form itself structurally imply an integration and submission of individual particularity to a universalized social norm (which, in the case of the Asian American novel, is racial or ethnic difference coded as an anterior to, less than, Western civilization), but in privileging a nineteenth-century European genre as the model to be approximated, Asian American literature is cast as imitation, mimicry, the underdeveloped other. (*Immigrant Acts* 45)

Asian American writers' adoption of this ideological, bourgeois cultural creation must go through a process of re-invention and re-adjustment. Therefore the Bildungsroman of the politically oppressed, including women and racial minorities, underlines a political ambition of awakening the self-consciousness and proclaiming new, worthy identities.

One of the most significant contributors of acclimatizing the Bildungsroman to Asian American literary studies is Patricia Chu. Beginning with a re-vision of the subgenre of Bildungsroman, Chu intends to differentiate the Asian American Bildungsroman from its European ancestry<sup>8</sup>. Two primary discoveries in her analyses of selected Asian American writers need to be mentioned. Firstly, the European Bildungsroman privileges the white, middle-class male; secondly, the subject of this subgenre is typically individuated over families and societal communities and has to originally contradict the values of families and societies in order to reach a concession with the demands of society in the end. Internalization of the societal values enables formation of the individual subject or maturation of the youth. Specialized in the field of Asian

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<sup>8</sup> Calling the European tradition the "ancestry" of this certain type of Asian American fictions may be quite controversial. But it is an incontestable fact that the Bildungsroman originated in European literatures as I've reviewed previously.

American studies, Chu purports that the Asian American subject's relationship with the social order is different from that of the European subjects: the ethnic individual's history does not necessarily contradict the history of their families or ethnic communities, and the family or community does not necessarily share the same values with the mainstream society at large. This fundamental difference determines that though adopting the same function of subject formation, the *norm* that premises the formation/transformation of the youth in the Bildungsroman has to differ.

An inquiry of the *normality* of American society—an entity—has already and always been the focus of Asian American studies, which is another factor that distinguishes the Asian American Bildungsroman from the European tradition. Moretti and Castle have explained the relationship between the entity and the Bildungshelden in detail. For Moretti, “[n]ormality is seen not as a meaning-ful, but rather as an unmarked entity. The self-defensive result of a ‘negation’ process, normality’s meaning is to be found outside itself in what it excludes, not in what it includes” (*The Way of the World* 11). Castle associates identity politics with the Bildungsroman and interprets identity as a reified entity of normality. Quoting Ardon, he repeats that as “the primal form of ideology” (Castle 18; Ardon 148), “[i]dentity is the means by which a social formation assimilates that which is antithetical to it, bringing otherness into its sphere and conquering it” (18). The entity in the Asian American Bildungsroman is not a singular one as in the Western Bildungsroman: its entity sometimes is the mainstream Eurocentric American society and sometimes refers to the ethnic community or family. The duality of its entity creates inextricable contradictions within itself, which renders the Asian American Bildungshelden’s subject formation multifaceted and less coherent.

The conflicts between the *Bildungshelden* and the entity in Asian American novels are developed in three complicated and overlapped phases: conflicts between the mainstream American society and the Asian American communities; between the mainstream American society and the Asian American individuated subjects; and between the Asian American communities and the Asian American individuated subjects. These conflicts do not exist singularly but intertwine with one another. Unlike the English codes of the *Bildungsroman*, neither marriage nor education offers Asian American protagonists a solution to happiness or upward social movement as it does to Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* “because marriage would signify their successful integration into the nation, a full assimilation that has not yet occurred either in fact or in the symbolic realm of mainstream culture” (Chu 19). Education can neither guarantee a successful assimilation nor unravel the intertwined conflicts between the Asian American *Bildungshelden* and the reality. In other words, happiness or social mobility fails to function as the highest value in Asian American novels and the Asian American *Bildungsroman* is *disabled* to appreciate the same values as the traditional *Bildungsroman*.

Deprived of ultimate happiness and upward mobility, the teleological argument for the Asian American *Bildungsroman* to act out its theory goes straight to assimilation. The contradiction between Asian American subjects—collective or individual—and the mainstream American society is catalyzed as their (in)ability to assimilate. The characters in the Asian American *Bildungsroman* are specified and modified as “*assimilating* subjects” (Chu 12; emphasis original). Assimilation is defined in Chu’s examination as to challenge and re-create the conceptions of national identity and complicated with two reciprocal functions in Asian American texts —claiming “Americanness for Asian American subjects” and constructing “accounts of Asian ethnicity that complicate...the primary claim of Americanness by

representing Asian Americans as grounded in highly specific ethnic histories in America” (4). Whereas the *norm* in the original European version of the Bildungsroman refuses to be questioned and demurred to and thus remains as the highest authority of truth, the *norm* in Asian American literary texts has been inquired, modified, re-created through the assimilating subjects’ activities. The theme of youth formation in the European Bildungsroman that is materialized and individuated is transformed in Asian American literature into *an identity construction with ethnic sensitivity in the core*. The experience of exclusion shared by both Asian American individuals and communities enables and necessitates a shift of the focus from an interior, private voice to a public experience or practice.

In addition to Lisa Lowe’s poststructuralist critique of the Western Bildungsroman, to simply apply this subgenre to Asian American literature understates a significant critique that prevails and dominates the scholarship on the Bildungsroman. The aforementioned literature review of the European tradition of this subgenre concludes that the Bildungsroman is initiated and studied as a modern phenomenon, or in Moretti’s words, a symbolic form of modernity. Industrialization as a phenomenon of modernity is in particular addressed in the English tradition: the Bildung gives a promise for upward social mobility by legitimizing “the rise to power of a certain class of young men, rewarding those whose desires for self-development are identical to the demands of the social system” (Castle 18). According to Patricia Chu, the Asian American tradition of the Bildungsroman subverts the base of the Bildung—the norm—and thus does not necessarily follow the English class-based tradition of the Bildungsroman. But it is hard not to notice that Chu’s selection of Asian American novels all ends up with a recognition—mostly appreciation—of the bourgeois culture and mentality, not mentioning Jennifer Ho, whose study of the foodways of Asian-ethnic Americans reinforces the ideology of consumption. Although

this subgenre still lacks consent among scholars and is enlarged with national variants, the teleological Bildungsroman must possess an accepted standard for classification. The Bildungsroman is meant to “educate” its subject and ultimately its reader. The teleology of the Asian American Bildungsroman reflects on the demography of the Asian American population in the pursuit of American dreams through assimilation. Having eventually *grown* into “an English-speaking, university-educated class who had become upwardly mobile despite their identification with the working class” (Sohn, et al. 3), they materialize the myth of model minorities. Sohn, Lai, and Goellnicht in their theorization of Asian American fiction remind the reader that “all Asian Americans share the ‘left-of-center’ ideology of ‘the Asian American intellectual class’” (Sohn, et al. 4; Nguyen 13); nevertheless, the breadth of Asian American fiction and the diversity of the Asian American population require “shifting understandings both of demographic changes in Asian America as well as of how our critical investments shape which authors and texts emerge as privileged subjects of analysis” (Sohn, et al. 4). With a trend that superimposes race over class, a celebration of the bourgeois culture in Asian American fiction is not all impossible. This phenomenon additionally explains the coherence and unity between form—the Bildungsroman—and content—middle class culture, or in the case of Asian American novels, the theme of model minorities.

When the Bildungsroman is renovated and revitalized to fit in modern literary forms, however, it turns out so expansive and inclusive that its definition is applicable even to anti-Bildungsroman, the theoretical opposite of the Bildungsroman. In other words, the emancipation of the Bildungsroman that equates the Bildungsroman with anti-Bildungsroman makes the concept of Bildungsroman more problematic and lose its legitimacy as a subgenre of fiction. In her comparative study of Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, Pin-chia Feng reveals that

the juxtaposition of Bildungsroman and anti-Bildungsroman is not uncommon in the female ethnic Bildungsroman in that the conterminous anti-Bildungsroman in the ethnic women's Bildungsroman projects a narrative that articulates an indispensable cultural condition shared by ethnic women while the "pure" form of Bildungsroman cannot envision or grant the multiple jeopardy that is exclusive to outside of the Eurocentric society. However, Feng resumes the dominant position of the Bildungsroman and suggests that "the divergence from the traditional *Bildungsroman*...is as much as a continuation of the genre as the conformity to the standard plot" (41); after all, "[t]he transgression of a genre, as Todorov contends, serves as a foil to highlight the norm of the genre" (41; Todorov 14). In other words, anti-Bildungsroman still implies a *Bildung* for the readership. If both subgenres suggest an education, why shall we stick to the ideological, color-blind, and problematic Western Bildungsroman? Why don't we employ a new term that technically dismantles the binary opposition between these two subgenres and takes a more feasible path to addressing and critiquing Asian American subject formation?

The concept of "transformation" shares the common ground with the presuppositions and generic features of the Bildungsroman and the anti-Bildungsroman. Though I propose this term as a *modus vivendi*, the changing power of transformation is "oriented toward an inner culture 'imaged' in the mind whose unification is actively pursued as a project of conscious construction" (Castle 35). While the Bildungsroman implies a force of formation and the anti-Bildungsroman infers a failure in compromising the selfhood in order to *conform* to social norms, "transformation" proffers a tolerant, transitory possibility for a cooperation of both subgenres and suits better the Asian American racialized historical particularity. As Patricia Chu has maintained, in the second phase of the ethnographical history of Asian Americans, assimilation and acculturation allow the subgenre of the Bildungsroman to be the major deployment by Asian

American writers because it “describes a subject who combines independence, mobility and outspokenness with a deep sense of affinity with familial and communal others; as a group, these texts work to affirm that both halves of this equation are American and both are Asian” (18). The conclusive and promising close of the Bildungsroman dismisses the indispensable confusion that often occurs to Asian American subjects’ self-identification when their ethnic community is disgruntled by the national recognition. Intended for a collaboration and coexistence between the Bildungsroman and its adversary, though meant for education, “transformation” allows the protagonists to confront their essential confusion instead of bulldozing the teleological ending with happiness or social fulfillment. In novels of transformation, both self-recognition and confusion signify maturation for Asian Americans.

As the Western Bildungsroman locates the (lower) middle class at the nexus of the story, Asian American transformation fiction centers on model minorities, which can be reduced to middle-class Asian Americans. Chiou-ling Yeh points out that “[m]ost existing literature has focused on the critique of the model minority myth and its detrimental effect on Asian Americans” (5). Naming this critique “anti-model-minority literature,” historian Lon Kurashige argues that this type of literature “fails to provide ‘the more enlightening challenge of understanding the past with all its contradictions and complexity’” (Kurashige 1; Yeh 5) and thus model-minority literature or the transformation fiction that emphasize the economic success of Asian Americans must be understood in the context of their times. The transformation from a surviving victim of racism to a thriving American citizen witnesses a history of such challenge through its celebration of successful assimilation with an ambitious project of resuming their ethnic traditions publicly on the American historical stage, which is an impossible imagination for the survival fiction. The activity of such resumption must be strategic instead of passive and

antagonistic. The celebration has additionally signified the self-empowerment of Asian Americans through re-identifying themselves alongside the mainstream culture.

However, such a celebration that features many Asian American Bildungsromans has endangered Asian American subjects by submitting them to an abject and articulateless situation. When Asian American cultural production is transfigured from the survival theme to the abjection motif, the latter stage ceases to focus “on the blatantly prohibitive phase of legislative discipline that gave us Chinese exclusion and Japanese internment, but on the apparently benign phase of post-World War II orientalism that began to incorporate Asians into the U.S. democracy” (Li, *Imagining the Nation* 25). Incorporating the anti-Bildungsroman in the second historical stage of Asian American cultural production, transformation fiction brings forward a more objective and less coercive interpretation of Asian Americans’ self-identification and subject formation. The selected texts in this chapter are meant to demonstrate that the transformation stage of Asian American novels portrays and purveys the complexity of the cultural phenomena of the “coming of age” generation that is reflected in Asian American individual rather than collective subjects’ maturation, capitalizes its ambivalent cultural attachment, and embraces features of both Bildungsroman and anti-Bildungsroman.

#### *IV. Donald Duk: Failed Bildungsroman, Successful Transformation*

*Donald Duk* came out during a time when the majority of Asian American creative writings were autobiographies or autobiographical fiction. The author of *Donald Duk*, Frank Chin, despised the genre of autobiographies (Davis 88) for the reason that by adopting such a literary genre, the Asian American writers of the 1980s were in fact pushing the ideas of Americanization, dysfunction and victimization of Asian American individuals and families.

*Donald Duk* was created as an exception by portraying a functioning Chinese American family. Carving an adolescent figurine to represent the process of maturation of Asian American individual subjects, Chin presented this novel as an Asian American Bildungsroman by dealing with the growing pains and happiness of Asian American post-first generations. This novel is uncustomary to Chin himself too: employing a child protagonist, *Donald Duk* departs from Chin's signature of anger and becomes more humorous and tolerant (Xu 37).

The narrative of *Donald Duk* is straightforward and characterized by the simplicity of its eponymous protagonist's language. The twelve-year-old Donald Duk is bothered by his ridiculous cartoon name and his Chinese heritage because “[o]nly the Chinese are stupid enough to give a kid a stupid name like Donald Duk” (Chin, *Donald Duk* 2). He detests being Chinese so much that everything Chinese bothers him. He tries to avoid other Chinese American kids at school and as a consequence, he is avoided too. Though befriending a white schoolmate, Arnold Azalea, he never invited Arnold home because his home is too Chinese. His father calls him a “white racist,” given that Donald not only “treats Chinese like dirt” but also regards Chinatown non-American, casts his ethnic fellows out of the American national construction (Chin, *Donald Duk* 88-89). Displaying his hatred towards Chinese through indifference, Donald neither speaks Chinese, nor cares about Chinatown. Every time his white history teacher talks about Chinatown, his “muscles all tighten up, and [he] wants Mr. Meanwright (the history teacher) to shut up” (Chin, *Donald Duk* 34).

But the self-hatred of Donald Duk must be encountered and overcome as determined by the teleological feature of the Bildungsroman. As soon as Chin suggests that “[t]here has to be an end to this. There is an end to all kidstuff for a kid. An end to diapers. An end to nursery rhymes, and fairy tales” (*Donald Duk* 7), it is clear that *Donald Duk* is a book of growth and maturation,

an Asian American Bildungsroman that transposes youth into adulthood. Symbolically, Donald Duk is turning twelve years old, an age, in Chin's own terms, "special to the Chinese"; and once the children go around the twelve years that complete a Chinese horoscopic cycle, they are not children anymore (*Donald Duk* 7, 56). To fulfill the requirement of growth out of the self-hatred complex, Chin utilizes consecutive dreams that lead to young Donald Duk's exploration and criticism of the historical manipulation of the national narrative. Compensating for a lack of the white America's knowledge of Chinese legends and culture, when audaciously defending the Chinese railroad construction laborers by confronting Mr. Meanwright, who irrefragably represents the public education system that reinforces the U.S. Eurocentric ideology, Donald Duk is configured for a mission of resuming the presence of Chinese Americans in the construction of the national history and eventually achieves his ethnic maturity.

Without much explanation, Frank Chin declares *Donald Duk* an Asian American *Catcher in the Rye* (Davis 88). However, the mere similarity between these two texts is their teenage protagonists. *Donald Duk* does not offer a hero that the readers could playfully and temporarily sympathize with as *The Catcher in the Rye* does. Initiated as children's literature, *Donald Duk* is unequivocally aimed for an educational project and it is a truism that Chin's target of education is his audience, though "presumably directed at Donald" (Richardson 58). The education is lucidly conducted to teach Chinese Americans ethnic pride, but Chin considers it as comprehensive as embracing everything—the Vietnam War, Christians, and Non-Christians<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> According to Chin, "fake" Asian American culture is Christianized culture because Christianity belongs to the West and Christianization of Asian America is cultural extinction. King-Kok Cheung in her 1993 book, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*, expresses her consensus with Chin in distinguishing the early immigrants' culture from the Chinese traditions that are substantially influenced by Confucianism. However, Cheung argues at the meantime that Chin's attribution of the submissive traits of Chinese Americans to Christianity "underestimate[s] the extent to which mainstream Chinese thought filters into folk imagination, in which the heroic ethos coexists with Buddhist beliefs and Confucian teachings (which do counsel self-restraint and obedience to parental and state authority)"; as a result, to accredit such features of Chinese Americans to white racism and to Christianity "is to discount the complexity and the rich contradictions of the

(Davis 89). Chin's didactic nagging is so imperative that it compels obedience from the readers and thus unexpectedly "undermine[s] the effectiveness of his argument to persuade and transform his readers" (Richardson 58). In order to make a solid argument, Chin imbues the novel with historical facts without, unfortunately, providing a cogent foundation. The exploration of Chinese American history is not only conducted by a Chinese American teenager but also foreordained to understatement and even inadvertent mutation caused by the voice of the authority—King Duk—in that the father assures Donald the *truth* of Chinese American history by means of reinforcing the validity of Chinese legends instead of historical realities. As a consequence, the lessons for/of Donald Duk fail to teach the readers or achieve the goals of *Bildung*.

Susan Richardson demonstrates how Chin has flunked his mission of education and points out that the singularity in the novel's didactic language features "wry humor, comic scenes of burlesque, and dialogue peppered with broad punning and the slangy, insult-laden bantering of young siblings" (58) and leaves little to no room for the readers to digest, to maneuver, and to transform themselves. In fact, Chin has made a mistake in comprehending the *Bildungsroman* genre. Though it is a novel of education and subject formation, the format of the novel should not be cartoon-like; children's literature is not equivalent to the *Bildungsroman*. On the contrary, the genre of children's literature will lessen the efficiency of ethnic education, since the readership of *Donald Duk* is largely likely not confined to Asian American teenagers. It is also reasonable to postulate that Chin understood the reality of his Asian American readership because the lessons for Donald Duk "enlist rational assent rather than emotional commitment"

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Cantonese culture and the necessary flexibility and adaptability of the early immigrants" (7n). Published in 1991, *Donald Duk* is reasonably believed to have developed from Chin's original overestimation of Christianity. In this novel, Chin ostensibly prioritizes the Chinese cultural personas as heroic, intelligent, masculine, instead of "lovable for being a race of sissies, cowed by women, and not black with all our hearts, living to accommodate the whitemen" (Chin, "Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy" 66).

(Richardson 65). Chin seems to believe that his readers are able to verify the Chinese American history with no suspicion because his potential readers are adults prepared with knowledge of historical truth. His intention, technique, and content conflict with one another and thus exemplify a lack of a full dimension of Asian American Bildungsroman scholarship; after all, the word *Bildungsroman* offers peculiar difficulties in itself. When this term is used to interrogate Asian American self-identification, it causes more confusion and ambiguity.

At the very moment of identity crisis faced by the post-1965 Asian Americans, the pioneer Asian American novelists marshaled their hopes for a literature appropriate to the new age. However, they were dragged into a faltering struggle with the forces of this new age. Unlike the European Bildungsroman realists, who were stricken by the industrial capitalism and modernity and fought through ways to memorialize this historical age of Light and Darkness, Asian American novelists find the genre of the Bildungsroman available and serviceable for building a transformative process from Asians to Asian Americans or simply Americans. But whether there exist so-called Asian American subjects remains questionable and ambiguous. The trend of distinguishing Asian America from Asia, with its confusion, perplexity and natural attachment to its Asian heritage as its prerequisite of existence, marks the beginning of the Asian American Bildungsroman. According to the Asian American writers, this subgenre that centers on the (anti)assimilationist mind records a process or a phase of development. Proposing an anti-assimilationism project for Asian American subject formation, Frank Chin dismisses any writing activity that revises the Chinese cultural heritage as faking Chinese American culture in order to provoke assimilation.

The battle between Chin and his critics commenced with a primary focus on his solid effort of fortifying the Chinese American masculinity at the cost of excluding Chinese American

women from his nationalist project, which is explicitly announced in his (in)famous preface to *The Big Aiiieeee!*, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” where he calls the version of Asian American history and literature created by Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan “the lie” (3). Extending his accusation of their faking “the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history” (“Come All Ye” 3), Chin reprimands these three writers for manipulating Asian American history and literature by establishing and presenting Chinese America as an ethnicity that has lost touch with their ancestry, and thus causes collective illiteracy. The causation of their fake cultural configuration of Chinese American history and literature, Chin insists, is their Christianization that is embodied in their adoption of the genre of autobiography or autobiographical fiction.

Chin does not pause at reproving the “fake” Chinese American writers’ acts of sabotaging and stereotyping Chinese American cultural images. He tries to correct them with the “real” version of Chinese literature: Fa Mulan is not tattooed; the Ugly Duckling does not become the swan in Chinese legends—Chinese have no respect for ducks because ducks are simply ducks; and the Chinese culture never degrades women while promoting the male dominance, which I would certainly disagree and, as a Chinese native, find such an assumption very naïve, simplistic, and historically erroneous<sup>10</sup>. Chin’s evidence in his essay is simply drawn from other Chinese fairy tales or legends. What is more universally known is that tales or legends are not categorically true to history and their fictionality equips them with no mandatory responsibility to tell the historical truth. While Chin proclaims that Chinese history and literature should not be lost to Chinese Americans, he never attempts to clarify that there is demarcation

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the opprobrious practice of foot binding is solid evidence to prove violence against women in Chinese history.

between history and literature. Whether or not Chin's version of Chinese legends is real, he misses the fundamental knowledge that literature does not always speak for history and vice versa. Strategically, he diverts the reader's heed from the disloyal relationship between literature and history to a debate between real and fake Chinese American literature and carries on this strategy of disporting the so-called "real" Chinese history and literature to his readers in the lessons of *Donald Duk*.

The storyline of the novel is set up during the Chinese New Year celebration in San Francisco Chinatown. Chin spares no effort to delineate a prosperous and realistic festive atmosphere in SF Chinatown. There is a noticeably rational element in Chin's passionate and emotional portrayal of this setting. This self-contradictory syuzhet is concreted in Donald Duk's behaviors and his statements about Chinese New Year in Chinatown. Being Donald's worst time of year, Chinese New Year brings about every bit of Donald's reluctance to be Chinese. When it comes to Chinese New Year, Donald becomes the target for "stupid questions about the funny things Chinese believe in. The funny things Chinese do. The funny things Chinese eat" (Chin, *Donald Duk* 3). In spite of his complaint about the New Year syndrome, Donald actually enjoys the New Year celebrations. He dresses up and does whatever his father tells him to do. What is more fundamental to the self-contradictory feature of the novel is that Donald willingly explores the meaning of the Chinese New Year and being Chinese, though, designed as an assimilationist, Donald insists that Chinese Americans forget the old—Chineseness—and celebrate the new—Americanness. Chin intends to commit to the development of Chinese American cultural identity as to the meaning of being Chinese Americans through Donald's exploration of Chinese New Year and of Chinese American history. But Donald's exploring performance appears clumsy:

although Donald is turning twelve years old, which symbolizes maturity according to Chin<sup>11</sup>, as a local Chinatown boy, he has experienced the Chinese New Year celebration for the past eleven years, and for this reason, the celebration rituals should not be strange to him. Therefore, the question arises again: to whom does Chin explain about the Chinese New Year festival? To what end does Chin offer detailed explanations about this tradition?

Realism works perfectly in Chinese American fiction as requisite for the educating project of Asian American studies, even when it is combined with mythology. When Chin makes every effort to describe the Chinese traditional culture to his reader, he certainly realizes (or perhaps is self-deceived and thus unaware<sup>12</sup>) that the reader is inclined to confuse “realism” as a literary mode with “reality” in every extraliterary sense. As a novelist, he has no need to advance such a distinction. Since “realism” with exuberant details is often conflated with “reality,” in Asian American literary production, the advantage of realism is further fulfilled due to a lack of knowledge among the readership about Asian America and Asia. The writer has more freedom to manipulate the source of information and coin languages and cultures that are unconventional and distant to the reader. This manipulation works for Kingston; and so for Chin as well. Chin’s elaborateness in drawing a “real” picture of Chinatown during the fifteen-day-long Chinese lunar New Year celebration infers his gesture of correcting the “fake” Kingstonian feminized Chinese traditions. In Chin’s version of the Chinese tradition, meat is not allowed on the festive table. The meatless dinner provided by King Duk on the Chinese New Year is deemed as the means to “restore ways that have become abandoned and recover knowledge that has been lost” (Chin,

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<sup>11</sup> In modern Chinese culture, the age of twelve years old does not represent maturity.

<sup>12</sup> Professor Sumida offered me a very interesting anecdote about the publication history of *Donald Duk*. In the first edition of the novel, Chin mistakenly placed Russian Hill and Nob Hill east of Chinatown while they are west of Chinatown. A reader noticed and informed Chin of such a mistake. In the second edition, this error has been corrected (Chin, *Donald Duk* 40). It implies that Chin himself truly believes that his book is not simply fictional. By staging the correct Chinese American geography, his novel is telling the “truth” of Chinese America.

*Donald Duk* 63). However, the hybridity of the dinner proves the opposite of the “lost” Chinese tradition:

Fettuccini Alfredo with shark’s fin. Poached fish in sauces made with fruit and vegetables. Olives on toast that taste like rare thousand-dollar caviar. Chocolate, bananas, yellow chili peppers, red chili oil and coconut milk go into one sauce over shredded chicken and crabmeat to be eaten rolled up in hot rice-paper pancakes with shredded lettuce, green onions and a dab of plum sauce. (Chin, *Donald Duk* 64)

Fettuccini Alfredo, olives, and chocolate are certainly not traditional Chinese food. Despite the fact that Chin “uses food to claim an American historical identity for his eponymous hero...and other Chinese Americans who can trace a literal as well as cultural heritage to the building of the Transcontinental Railroad” (Ho 4), the hybridity on the so-called traditional Chinese New Year dinner table suddenly accelerates the obscurity and bewilderedness of an anti-assimilationist message. One can argue that the education for Donald Duk and the reader is redirected and reinforced in this sketch that being Chinese American means the correlation of Chineseness and Americanness, not replacing one with the other and claiming complete acculturation. However, why has the similar education exerted by Kingston lost its meaning as such in Chin’s proclamation?

Chin cannot avoid the quagmire of his education plan in the novel, considering his previous judgment on the real and fake Chinese American writers. By insisting on a “real” presentation of Chinese legends, Chin forgets to inquire how real his version of Chinese literature is and upon what foundation his theory of “real” Chinese history is built. Despite his strategy of proposing an anti-assimilationist project through the protagonist Donald Duk, by selecting the realistic Chinese New Year festival setting as a platform to display his claim of

patriotism and ethnic pride, Chin unconsciously corresponds to the U.S. strategy of creating a multicultural nation that advocates cultural pluralism and assimilation, and as a result, devastates his own plan of Bildung. The Chinese New Year festival was recognized by the ethnic leaders in the 1950s as homage to both Chinese traditions and American democratic politics. The recuperation of the Chinese New Year gala was situated by the ethnic leaders in the context of Cold War with the purposes of unifying non-Communist Chinese Americans and celebrating American democratic practices. Usually sponsored by Chinese American businessmen, the celebration offers a great opportunity to “transform Chinese Americans from a racialized location into an assimilable ethnic position” through their display of Americanness and fulfillment of the U.S. Orientalist expectation because the ethnic leaders believe “it was culture, not race, that defined them, thereby allowing them to ethnically assimilate into white America” (Yeh 4, 34). To showcase their loyalty to the U.S. after WWII alongside the “fall” of China<sup>13</sup>, the Chinese ethnic leaders were eager to dissociate themselves from Red China by promoting the Orientalist fantasy of San Francisco Chinatown in order to establish an image of good citizens or model minorities. The organizers of the festivities charged the Communist China with eliminating the rich traditions and colorful legends of China, though there was no documentary proof that the Communist government of China banned the observation of the Spring Festival, also known as the lunar New Year Festival. Rather, it was the Republic China that had ruled out this tradition after overthrowing the Qing dynasty in 1911 (Yeh 9).

Having attempted to claim the resumption of the “real” Chinese tradition and with the commercial purpose in mind, the Chinese ethnic leaders accentuated Chinatown as an exotic and foreign place within America and between the West and East. In the Chinese New Year festival

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<sup>13</sup> The “fall” of China has twofold meanings: the Communist Party’s takeover of China and the Kuomintang’s escape to Taiwan.

celebration, lion dances, red lanterns, Chinese costumes, incenses, and personas of Chinese legends are exhibited to cope with the American perception of Chinese Americans and profoundly symbolize the prosperity of model minorities as well as the gratification of Chinese Americans. In this way, the festivity has transformed Chinatown into “a safe place for mainstream consumers” (Yeh 34), given that “[b]y reinforcing ties to a Chinese past rather than focusing on an American present or future,’ festive programs ‘do not burden the consciousness of their Euro-American” customers (M. Young 145; Yeh 129). As the ethnic leaders placed the responsibility upon themselves of presenting the Chinese New Year traditions, Chinese American writers including Frank Chin took over the mission of explaining these traditions to the Euro-Americans for the sake of education. Assuming a cultural authority and coordinator, Chin *records* the quotidian experiences of Chinese Americans during the festive period and unfolds the eating habits of his fellow men. This bourgeois obsession with food is perfectly exemplified by the character of King Duk, a prominent chef in Chinatown, who used to serve “on the security staff of the U.S. Army chief of staff, a four-star general” during WWII and “passed the war in the kitchens of presidents, prime ministers, lords and generalissimos” (Chin, *Donald Duk* 9). With a reputation as such, King Duk is discretionarily positioned as an ethnic leader of San Francisco Chinatown and a spokesman for Chinese Americans.

The power of authority is most often posed in terms of social agency, such as personal wealth or social status. King Duk possesses both. Though King Duk is described as “not rich...not poor, either” (Chin, *Donald Duk* 8), he owns a successful Chinese restaurant and is one of the best cooks in Chinatown. He masters all culinary skills of various cuisines from around the world, including Chinese, Italian, and French. During the festivity, he plays Kwan Kung in the Cantonese opera, which is the most important part in the opera. King Duk’s role as Kwan Kung

does not only signify his leading role in San Francisco Chinatown; he is one of the few people that keep the Cantonese opera alive worldwide, as is described in the novel. Mr. Yin, Donald Duk's *taichi* teacher, explains to Donald that during the Cultural Revolution, the Cantonese opera was banned in China and as a result, the opera performers left China because there is "[n]o more Canton for Cantonese opera" (Chin, *Donald Duk* 56), which implies that the U.S. Chinatown replaces Canton ("Guangdong" in Mandarin Chinese) Province of China by inhabiting the greatest Cantonese opera performers. The persona of King Duk and the exaggeration of his influence on the Cantonese opera elucidate Chin's illusion of Chinese history and culture.

As a nationalist, without an explication, Chin mingles Chinese history—to be more accurate, not history, but legends—and Chinese American history together. On the one hand, he defines the "real" Chinese American history through Chinese legends, which lays the ground for his strategy of nominating the "fake" Chinese American writers. For instance, it is in honor of Lee Kuey, alias the Black Tornado, from the Chinese legend *Water Margin*, that the adolescent Donald Duk comes to terms with his real Chinese name "Lee" and the family history behind it, a history that starts with his great-great-grandfather as the first of the Lees moving to America and "work[ing] on the Central Pacific [Railroad] when it went east over the Sierra and on to Promontory" (Chin, *Donald Duk* 23). The story of Lee Kuey is intentionally used to teach Donald the histories of his family and consequently of Chinese America since, according to Chin, stories can be used to generate "informed, morally conscious citizens" and Chinese legends and stories in particular serve as "an important tool for reminding Chinese-Americans of their heritage" (Shervington 9; Richardson 57). On the other hand, in the dilemma of his proposal to reveal the true Chinese American history without spoiling a children's book with history

education, Chin turns to Donald's dreams and *Water Margin* for a historical truth. Claiming that all history is wrong while everything Donald dreams is true, Chin attunes to adolescent readers' taste and reinforces the Asian American realism's affinities for contemporaneousness. However, it is the same strategy that fails to bring the reader to effective insights into the social problems of the historically unique, industrialized, and racialized culture of the U.S. From these two perspectives, there is no rudimentary difference between Chin and Kingston in their utilizations of Chinese legends.

But their writing strategies are different: the distinction between Chin's and Kingston's usages of the Chinese legends simply lies in how they present the legends. While Kingston displays a modernist—"fake" in Chin's words—version of the legends, Chin depicts a realist—"real"—version along with a fake Chinese history, which makes his accusation of "fake" Chinese American writing ironic. In order to subvert the "fake," feminized, and racialized image of Chinese men, Chin deliberately relates the real Chinese culture to masculinity and violence, which is exemplified by Lee Kuey from the Chinese classic, *Water Margin*. As one of the *Water Margin* outlaws, Lee Kuey is portrayed, revised, and refracted by Chin into a bloodthirsty, terrifying, and cannibal Chinese *Robin Hood*, who consumes his deceased mother's flesh simply because he is hungry (Chin, *Donald Duk* 159). The irony is that though Chin claims his memory of Chinese legends real, he seemingly has not re-read the story before he made his announcement because Lee Kuey is famous for his familial piety, not by eating his mother's flesh but by slaying four tigers that devour his mother alive. Craving Chinese masculinity not only brings Chin nationwide criticism of misogyny, but also contradicts his self-defined mission of defending Chinese culture and history. Emphasizing the importance of Lee Kuey in *Water Margin*, Chin chooses to ignore the diversity of the Mount Leong (Liang) outlaws in the legend through his

writer's selection. What he fails to mention or perhaps even notice is that, though *Water Margin* is a story that calls common people to rise up against the corrupted empire/government, the failure of the outlaws' rebellion puts the legend to an end: some of the outlaws' leaders surrender to the monarch, which directly results in the imprisonment and death of the rest of the Mount Leong outlaws. Chinese Left-wing critics such as Lu Xun<sup>14</sup> regard the Water Margin men not as heroes but as *núcai*—flunkeys, servants, or yes-men with unquestioning obedience—in that these outlaws do not rebel against the emperor but only treacherous court officials, not against the feudal system but the people suppressed by the system. Without a solid knowledge of Chinese legends and history, Chin eventually and unknowingly makes himself a “fake” Chinese American writer that cooperates with the acculturation project of the U.S. education.

If history is absolute, and if it is the absolute narrative history that distinguishes the real and fake Chinese American writers, self-contradictions stand in the way of Chin's proposal for a real Chinese America. Like the “fake” Chinese American writers that maneuver the Chinese culture to their own benefits, Chin's fakeness lies in his “inattention to representational accuracy” (Li, *Imagining the Nation* 226n). David Leiwei Li charges Chin with violating the original texts of the Chinese mythology in the same way as Chin charges Maxine Hong Kingston. Li reminds the reader that

Chin's own conflation in the episode of the track-laying competition is equally serious. The rebel soldiers of the Water Margin could never have galloped side by side with the heroic warrior Kwan Kung in “real” historical time, for between Kwan Kung's Three Kingdoms and the outlaws' Song Dynasty is a gap of eight to eleven centuries. But like

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<sup>14</sup> Lu Xun (1881-1936) was the leading left-wing critic and writer in pre-WWI China. His influence on modern Chinese history, literature, and culture is tremendous and timeless.

Kingston's use of Mu Lan, Chin's poetic license seems equally empowering for Donald's recognition and registering of racial pride. (*Imagining the Nation* 226n; Leonard 189)

It is my impression that much confusion in Chin's claims pertaining to Chinese history and literature is prompted by his negligence to the differences between China and Chinese America, history and literature. While Chin's lack of knowledge about China and Chinese history renders his inability to judge what is fake Chinese culture, his resolute equation of history with literature leads to the mutilation of the *Bildung* in *Donald Duk*. His confusion of Chinese legends and history dismantles his argument about fake and real, and proves that "[l]osing touch with China" did "result in Chinese Americans losing touch with 'The Ballard of Mulan'" (Chin, "Come All Ye" 3), which at the meantime furnishes Chinese Americans the ability of inventing their own history. As he subconsciously posits himself as King Duk, the American-born Chinese American "who had folks who worked hard to know absolutely nothing about China, who believed that if all they knew was 100 percent American-made in the USA Yankee know howdy doodle dandy, people would not mistake them for Chinese" (*Donald Duk* 42), Chin discloses his self-suspicion about his own knowledge of China despite his public réclame of representing the Chinese American identity through a real presentation of Chinese cultural heritage.

As much as many Asian American critics have reproached Chin for the hardline distinction he has drawn between the "fake" and the "real" Asian American literatures, Asian American feminists register their unease with Chin's intention to re-masculinize Chinese America through an ascendant presentation of violence, which is predicated upon the idea of racist love reprimanded by Chin. The emasculation of the Chinese ethnicity that foregrounds Chin's focus on violence in Chinese legends is specified in Donald's California History teacher's lecture early in the novel:

“The Chinese in America were made passive and nonassertive by centuries of Confucian thought and Zen mysticism. They were totally unprepared for the violently individualistic and democratic Americans. From their first step on American soil to the middle of the twentieth century, the timid, introverted Chinese have been helpless against the relentless victimization by aggressive, highly competitive Americans. One of the Confucian concepts that lends the Chinese vulnerable to the assertive ways of the West is *the mandate of heaven*. As the European kings of old ruled by divine right, so the emperors of China ruled by the mandate of heaven.” (Chin, *Donald Duk* 2)

It is uncontroversial that Chin uses violence as a tool to dismiss the Orientalist vision of the submissive and abject features of Chinese Americans at the expense of subverting his loyalty to the truth of Chinese legends and history as well as discharging the nonbelligerent traits of Chinese and Chinese Americans. Take *Water Margin* for example: this Chinese novel does not thematize violent rebellion; it can be interpreted, nonetheless, as a demonstration that violence is unable to solve social problems as long as it is not employed to advance society but to protect and strengthen the feudal system.

But not all Asian Americanists reject Chin’s strategy of utilizing and aggrandizing violence in Chinese legends. In defense of Chin’s devotion to violence in *Donald Duk*, Viet Thanh Nguyen denotes that the American Bildungsroman unifies literature and violence and “enacts violent exclusion against those who do not match the profile of its ideal subjects (white, heterosexual, male, and eventually propertied)” while negating the inclusion of the subjection in its discourse of normality (“The Remasculinization of Chinese America” 132). He explains that what Chin confronts is the discursive violence that deprives Chinese Americans of their share of American history and deploys narratives to justify and write the history that is preoccupied by

the Euro-centric ideology. For Chin, “[h]istory is war” (*Donald Duk* 122) and “writing is fighting” (Nguyen, “The Remasculinization of Chinese America” 148); it is not about fair, but a battle between the “fake” and the “real.” In order to restore the truth to Chinese American and American history, Chin’s writing betrays a determination to find the truth instead of fabricated narratives, even though it has to be done through violence that indicates misogyny and collectivism. Nguyen argues that “Chin is not only or not so much a sexist or misogynist but also a historical fundamentalist” because history in Chin’s observation “is real...in the sense that it is absolute” (“The Remasculinization of Chinese America” 150).

Nguyen’s input on Chin’s deployment of violence is timely and encouraging among all the criticism on Chin’s works. Frantz Fanon has long before in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) reasoned violence used by the “inferior species” in the colonial narrative to dominate a world compartmentalized between the colonists and the colonized. However, Nguyen’s a posteriori conclusion of Chin becomes a priori, which is possibly due to his own lack of the knowledge of Chinese culture and history. Nguyen’s categorization of Chin as a historical fundamentalist can be only made well-grounded if Chin’s division between the “real” and the “fake” Asian American writers is distracted from an implication of authenticity in representing Chinese tradition. Nguyen argues that the fundamentalist Chin intends to present Chinese Americans not as an Orientalist, racist construct, but a people descended from the unracialized Chinese culture that is not tainted with American color. While tattooed Fa Mulan is a racialized object catering to the taste of the white American readership, the Chinese legends like *Three Kingdoms* (of which Kwan Kung is one of the protagonists), *Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West* must be understood and translated the way they are to remain real and true to the original Chinese version instead of being told as twisted Americanized stories of Chinese heroes. But in addition to his

conflation of these stories, Chin himself endows the Chinese legends with an American idealism. For instance, the mandate of heaven is so fancied by King Duk with democracy that it betrays Chin's subconscious belief in *The Declaration of Independence*.

Chiou-ling Yeh's observation of Chinatown and its Spring Festival comes to grips with the militant capacity of Chinese Americans that helps explain Chin's obsession with masculinity. Yeh writes,

Influenced by the civil rights and black power movements, Chinese American youth adopted a militant masculine identity to oppose the docile and feminized model minority image. They argued that the model minority narrative failed to tackle structural class and racial issues. Instead, they called for "yellow power" and attacked racial and class inequality. Male activists, however, insisted on conflating ethnic nationalism with militant masculinity, which unfortunately reproduced gender inequality and discriminated against homosexuals. (7)

This cognition of the violent potentiality betrays another incompatible fact in *Donald Duk*: King Duk and the other Chinatown fellows are perfect representatives of the assimilated model minorities. In fact, King Duk's position and reputation in Chinatown has rendered Donald Duk's education of being an Asian American incomplete, privileged, and near racially formed. Though Donald has clarified that King Duk is not rich, it is hard to pass over the fact that King Duk shows his generosity by distributing rice in Chinatown during the Chinese New Year; and it is even harder to miss the flash lines of Daisy Duk when she laments, "Why do we millionaires believe one has to be poor to produce great art?" (Chin, *Donald Duk* 165). It is likewise precisely indicated that Donald's friend Arnold comes from a very wealthy family. In the meanwhile, the two poor "[s]crunched-up old Chinatown women do not even have a family

name, but merely referred to as the Frog twins because of their ‘frog eyes’” (Chin, *Donald Duk* 10). Susan Richardson has pinpointed the failure of the novel in contributing a moral lesson since it “contains no indictment of the American economic system and draws no link between class and race exploitation” (70); instead, it reinforces this class ideology—the poor cannot be handsome or recognized. In addition, by singling out Irish railroad laborers as rivals of Chinese laborers in Donald’s dreams, the novel diverts its target of criticism to the equally poor white laborers and thus muffles the real voice of the oppressed in terms of class, along the lines of race and gender.

The inconsistency in Chin’s argument partially stems from his manipulation of the literary form. Picturing *Donald Duk* as an Asian American Bildungsroman, Chin does not associate the novel with realism, neither modernism. No doubt there are moments of homely details: the location, descriptions of rituals, food, and festive activities all make the novel realist. But the novel in total effect is tuned to be heroic, chivalric, exotic, and even romantic. King Duk and Uncle Donald Duk are posed as heroes; the American Con is mysterious. The most unrealistic is Donald Duk’s dreams, which turn the real history into a piece of dubious, mystic literature while it ought to be resumed in the areas of experience that are verifiable. The history is not conceived by the eyes of a necessarily supersensitive observer, but redeemed by a child’s imagination and fictional personas that have a paradoxical relationship with Chinese America. Although dreaming “helps advance the fictional text as a literary motif” and “signifies a model of history-making by which characters are invited to make imaginative interventions into their own cultural pasts” (Leonard 182), it should not be overlooked that *Donald Duk* does not possess the same didactic efficiency as the paragons of the genre, naming *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* by Goethe or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde for the reason that,

instead of summoning an examination of the systematic formation of Asian American self-contempt, *Donald Duk* reduces its agency of criticism without recognizing the fragmentariness and provisionality of dreams.

What forces Donald to look for the knowledge of Chinese American history is his successive dreams of twelve hundred Chinese railroad workers on the Pacific West. Donald dreams the history of the Chinese railroad laborers. In his dream, Crocker as one of the Central Pacific's Big Four owns the railroad the Chinese are building. The symbolism of Crocker is too obvious to cause any dispute: he is dressed in all white, "white kidney-shaped riding britches, a white buffalo-skin jacket, a white pith helmet, white leather gloves and white riding crop for his white horse" (Chin, *Donald Duk* 73). The simplicity of symbolism in the novel further demonstrates that Chin means to avoid any dispute so that "his dreams are objectively true" (Leonard 192). It is these dreams that drive Donald to search for his ancestors' history in America and attempt to place them in the history of the U.S. Without differentiating dreams and reality or questioning the objectivity or truth, the novel is unable to dismiss the ideology or institutional knowledge that constructs the national history of the country. Suzanne Leonard diagnoses the illegitimacy of Chin's strategy of dreaming to educate Asian American subjects. Having acknowledged that "dreaming can be conceived of as a mode of historiography that reshapes what counts as history and knowledge," she contends that Chin's attempt to "suggestively interrogate[s] the relationship between dreaming and cultural identity...at times overestimates the ease with which knowledges gained from dreams might be called upon to advance revisionary histories" and hence "reduces the generative power of Donald's imaginative intervention into the project of creating a politics of memory" (182).

Chin's failure in his *Bildung* project, however, does not stem from his plan for forming Donald Duk's ethnic identity; neither does it lead to the same failure in brandishing the transformation of Asian American subjects. The teen protagonist reaches his symbolic maturity by finally conforming to the *norm* that is effected by the ethnic leaders, who are represented by his father. He does ultimately interiorize his contradiction with the Chinatown community. Without questioning the model minority image or challenging the intraraical and intraethnic economic injustice of the Chinese American community, Donald Duk is brought to his happiness by fulfilling ethnic pride and celebrating assimilation. The image of model minorities is once again defended and perpetuated through cultivating the youth. The reductive transformation is achieved by fashioning Asian American subjects from victims of racial violence to national civilians and beneficiaries from the U.S. democratic policy of multiculturalism. On this front, Chin succeeds in his *Bildung*. However, denying the autonomy of the Asian American readership, Chin's *Bildung* fails to reach his pedagogical goal. It is the critical audience that consummates the transformation of Asian American subjects by refusing to accept such an illusion of Chin's *Bildung*. Their critique and examination of Chin's *Bildung* substantiates their transformation from abject surviving victims and recipients of the U.S. national racialization to mature, independent agencies fighting for natural human rights.

#### V. *The Ordeal of Native Speaker: Bildungsroman or Anti-Bildungsroman?*

Asian American autobiographical fiction and *Bildungsromane* are often recognized as immigrant novels due to their common proclaim for national inclusion and racial visibility. In the middle of the domination of immigrant novels, *Native Speaker* stands out for thematizing invisibility, which has won itself a reputation that parallels Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, as

shown in a dozen blurbs on its front pages. Once published, unlike a majority of Asian American novels that mostly attract Asian American audience, the novel has drawn great attention from the American media: it is extolled as an absorbing, splendid, elegant, rapturous, haunting, inspiring, masterfully written, and “lyrical page-turner,” words that the reader will not miss in the blurbs of *Native Speaker*. These compliments, however, simply illustrate that what seems to astound the vast readership is its elements of suspense as a spy novel, of inspiration it can produce for old and new immigrants, who are encouraged by the national narrative to become model minorities, and of family tragedy that can besiege the American audience with commiseration. Ethnic identification speaks loud in these blurbs, but is almost overcome by their focus on the family tragedy of Henry Park, the novel’s protagonist.

Asian American critics have pointed out that *Native Speaker* is calibrated to a particular political and historical phenomenon that is in particular circumscribed by two events: the tension between Korean American and African American communities that was fortified by the fatal shooting of Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, by Soon Ja Du, a fifty-one-year-old Korean American store owner in 1991, which is believed to have partially triggered the 1992 Los Angeles Riots; and the *Golden Venture*<sup>15</sup> tragedy on 6 June 1993. However, the political tension per se does not prepare the fictional characters for individual transformation. Transformation fiction because of its Bildungsroman component completes its protagonist’s education either through his or her eventual failure in society due to their premature, untimely,

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<sup>15</sup> Patrick Keefe records that a vermin-infested ship, *Golden Venture*, smuggled 286 illegal immigrants from Fujian Province, China, and after a mutiny by the smugglers, ran aground off the Rockaway peninsula, New York, around 1am on 6 June 1993. Ten people were reported drowned in their attempts to flee the grounded ship and get to shore in New York City (Keefe 16). The survivors were taken into custody by the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) at 201 Varick and were put in jail afterwards while applying for political asylum. Although roughly ten per cent were granted asylum and minors were released, 171 of the survivors were deported. Some remained in immigration prison for years fighting their cases, the majority in York County Prison, Pennsylvania, and the females in New Orleans. The final *Golden Venture* detainees were released by President Clinton on 26 February 1997 across the country—in Berkeley, California, in Winchester, Virginia, and in New Orleans (Keefe 261). Keefe comments, “It was the single largest arrival of illegal aliens in modern American history” (16).

revolutionary activities or via the character's redemption for such activities that lead to their maturity—conformity with society at large. *Native Speaker* follows the second pattern in a modified manner. Henry's education and maturation as a Korean American is accomplished through his redemption or even atonement caused by his betrayal of John Kwang, a successful Korean American councilman and New York City mayor runner, who is found out smuggling illegal Korean immigrants to the States. Henry's Bildung is sophisticated by Chang-rae Lee through his authorial questioning of the immigration system: rather than conforming to the established social norm that defines Americanness solely by whiteness, the Bildungshelden of *Native Speaker* introspects into and exposes the national legal system that legitimizes and neutralizes whiteness. However, Henry does not subvert his adoption of whiteness altogether. The duality of his self-identification in fact remains consistent throughout the novel. For this reason, his Bildung seems incomplete. Thus, the novel turns into a puzzle that swings between Bildungsroman and anti-bildungsroman.

Tim Engles's negation of Henry's achievement of self-autonomy implies a possible reading of anti-Bildungsroman. He conceives of Lelia as the most significant white Other in *Native Speaker*. Lipsitz confirms that “[a]s the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relation” (369), as whiteness “secures its dominance by *seeming not to be anything in particular*” (Dyer 44; Lipsitz 369; emphasis mine). Based upon the concept of whiteness diagnosed by Lipsitz and focused on Lelia, Engles holds an intertextual argument against critiques that render *Native Speaker* fulfilling a second-generation immigrant's self-recognition as a Korean American. Not only claiming that Henry's marriage with Lelia and eventual return to Lelia are a result of his intentional “contact with middle-class white American

culture” (33), Engles also concludes that the voice Henry regains to frame his self-conception at the novel’s close “only seems like his own because it speaks from a middle-class white perspective that functions by seeming not to be anything in particular” (45). As a result, the integral presence of whiteness in Henry’s mind signifies Henry’s failure to achieve autonomy.

Engles’s argument that configures Lelia for whiteness helps to disillusion a middle-class, liberal, and color-blind reading and emphasis on the tragedy that happens to Henry and his family—Mitt’s death and the ensuing marriage crisis between Henry and Lelia—by understating the color-line motif of the novel. Lelia’s role as a speech therapist ratifies the power of the language and the destructive consequences of white narratives. Lelia is portrayed as an independent, liberal, strong, emotional, eloquent, and confident typical white American woman, born to a wealthy upper-middle class family with divorced parents. She is dearly beloved by Henry’s father, who “always tried to stand right next to her, and then marvel (*sic*) at how tall and straight she was, *like a fine young horse*” (C. Lee 57; italics original). Father would tell his friends and coworkers in English that Lelia is his daughter, believing that Lelia and her family would help Henry make his way on American soil (C. Lee 57-58). Lelia believes in the explicability of emotions and emphasizes the importance of words in her intimate relationship with Henry. In addition, Lelia’s laid-back upbringing and Anglo-Saxon attributes endow her with an aura of effortlessness, which is, as Henry confesses, the most loveable quality about her:

When she play-acts, horses around, she is silly and awkward, completely unconvincing. She must be the worst actor on earth. And perhaps most I loved this about her, her helpless way, love it still, how she can’t hide a single thing, that she looks hurt when she is hurt, seems happy when happy. That I know at every moment the precise place where

she stands. What else can move a man like me, who would find nothing as siren or comforting? (C. Lee 158-59)

In contrast to Lelia, Henry's father would ask him to consider everything but love as if family and children are imposed upon him by duties instead of love. After his confession, Henry counters his invisible audience: "call me what you will. An assimilationist, a lackey. A duteous foreign-faced boy. I have already been whatever you can say or imagine, every version of the newcomer who is always fearing and bitter and sad" (C. Lee 160).

However, Engles's reading has missed certain explanations: if whiteness is absolutely incompatible with Asian American individual autonomy, then what is the alternative solution to Asian Americans' self-identification? Besides, Engles passes over the complexity of Asian Americans' self-identification and simply rejects whiteness, which reduces the autonomy of Asian American subjects to mere negation by implying that a total rejection of whiteness and embracement of Asianness should yield Asian American subjects' autonomy. The inquiry of the ethnic Bildungsroman can be extended to the relationship between Asian American subjects' autonomy and Asian American self-identification. Thus the above question becomes: what is the symbolic form of maturity in the Asian American discourse? How do the subject formation and the accomplishment of individual autonomy function in the Asian American Bildungsroman? Does anti-assimilationism help Asian American subjects ultimately achieve autonomy? What kind of transformation or maturation occurs to Henry eventually?

By charting the rise and fall of John Kwang, a New York state councilman, a first-generation Korean American, and a potential mayoral candidate, *Native Speaker* through the eyes of Henry Park the spy defies the nation-based identity and territorial imagination. With Henry's transformation from a spy working at a multicultural intelligence company to a Korean

American that acquires an awareness of the duality of his identity, *Native Speaker* seemingly implies an exposé of the Bildungsroman teleology. However, at the end of the novel, the suspicion from the students in Lelia's ESL class towards the inconsistency between Henry's immigrant Korean countenance and his perfect formal English enunciation still besets the confirmation of Henry's self-identification and implies that the Asian American subject is still at question achieving its legitimacy in the national narrative of the U.S. Both Liam Corley and Jodi Kim contend that though coming to terms with his Koreanness in the end, "Henry confronts greater levels of self-doubt" and is left without establishing "a coherent sense of self" (J. Kim 134), which renders this novel an anti-Bildungsroman and complicates the ethnic Bildungsroman that dominates Asian American novels. However, Henry has certainly experienced a transformation and an education, based on which some readers have granted this novel a Bildungsroman. Crystal Parikh suggests that trading with "the generic conventions of the spy novel and the realist immigrant narrative or ethnic bildungsroman," *Native Speaker* refuses to wholly conform to either (118). It is precisely the non-conformity that dismantles the full commitment and application of the Bildungsroman to ethnic literatures. After all, the doubleness of immigrants and their descendants makes them envision themselves in a limbo of inbetweenness. However, the purposeful transformation is still projected into this novel, not via a linear trajectory from youth to maturity, but by emphasizing the reciprocation between these two symbolic momenta.

Beginning with an educational project, the suspending closure of *Native Speaker* subverts the realist Bildungsroman subgenre. The protagonist narrator has assured the reader that his romantic mood for his interracial marriage is "unhealthy"; or in his wife Lelia's words, he is an "emotional alien," along with other suggestive descriptions of him, "B+ student of life," "illegal

alien,” “Yellow peril: neo-American,” “anti-romantic,” “stranger,” “traitor,” and “spy” (C. Lee 5). With their only son, Mitt, dead on his seventh-birthday, Lelia leaves for El Paso, taking nothing Henry has given to her, as a gesture of rejection to Henry’s resilience, silence, and inability to express his grief. But it is these attributes Henry possesses as a Korean American makes him natural as a spy, a supposedly invisible man. The deliberate metaphor of the spy, however, has been noticed by critics as a mask that multiplies a “spy’s sense of doubleness... by the immigrant’s sense of doubleness” (Klinkenborg 77). However, by focusing on Henry’s role as a spy, some critics—especially the non-Asian Americanist ones—are distracted by its effectiveness and appropriateness as a spy novel. Verlyn Klinkenborg in his review argues that though the language is “elliptical, riddling, poetic, often beautifully made,” “it’s the wrong language for telling a spy story” as it makes spying “too small a vehicle for ambitions of the kind that Chang-rae Lee rightly harbors” (77).

Tina Chen dismisses such emphases on the spy component in *Native Speaker*. She contends that to focus on the spy storyline will result in a misreading and divert the attention from the metatext of the narrative. Henry’s story is not about how he spies on his subjects, in particular the Korean American politician John Kwang. The conventional spy novel is articulated in unnecessary and flamboyant details and features “a fascination with the trope of undetectability; an exploration of the license and voyeuristic thrills that characterize the ‘fantasy of invisibility’; the double plot of detection; and the presentation of the spy as a storyteller, the story a paradigm for the processes of reading and writing” (Chen 640); but these characteristics yield an unrealistic spy story and an unconvincing spy character, such as Ian Fleming’s James Bond. To borrow Bruce Merry and Somerset Maugham, Chen advances her argument that the literary representation of espionage stories not only is exaggerating but also fails to correspond to

the real-life spy facts. Most of the spying work does not offer a coherent network of materials to the reader but is often clueless and even useless; thus it becomes the author's job to make a consistent and dramatic plot that surrenders a spy story to drama. Without any chase-and-run or bloody scenes that color spy fictions like *007* or even the true crime novel imagined by John Kwang's protégée, Janice Pawlowsky, *Native Speaker* presents its spy protagonist with a calm, dull, silent, and realistic demeanor. The function of espionage is not to entice the reader into an excitement and a mode of correcting the errors. Espionage is manipulated by Lee as a trope for Henry's "uneasy position as a Korean American trying to figure out his place in American society" (Chen 638).

The suggestive label of spies in motley forms has been readily imposed upon Asian Americans since WWI, when Japanese in the U.S. were suspected to spy on and eventually colonize America under the guidance of the Japanese government. The internment camps set up for Japanese Americans during WWII reinforced the national security project of racial profiling and branding Asian Americans permanent aliens as well as an enemy race. The following wars with Asia (the Vietnam War and the proxy Korean War) imperviously attached the status of Asian Americans to the U.S. foreign policy in Asia. Manipulated by the Cold War state's ruling fantasy, the U.S. government confronted itself with Asia without being able to provide a coherent moral justification for its presence in Asia or "discriminate the difference between war crimes and incidents of war" (Pease 57). Noam Chomsky identifies all the "Asian masses" with the involvement of the U.S. as "a symptom of 'official racism,'" which is "the general equivalent that correlated U.S. efforts to construct the Japanese people as the nation's 'official enemy' during World War II with the policy of genocide in Vietnam and with the mass destruction of civilian populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (Chomsky 298-99; Pease 58). Though the New

World order disrupted the Cold War ideology, the racialization of Asian Americans did not evanesce. The arrest and deportation of Wen Ho Lee, a Taiwanese-born physicist from Los Alamos National Laboratories (LANL), who was fired and investigated for “possibly having transmitted secrets on U.S. nuclear technology and capability to the People’s Republic of China” (Parikh 131), threatens to reveal the discontinuity and disparateness of the new order<sup>16</sup>. However, the tradition of alienating and categorizing Asians in the U.S. as public enemies is not debauched by Chang-rae Lee in his novel; rather, through designating Henry as an actual spy, Lee complicates the polarized Manichaeism between enemies and citizens. Furthermore, Henry’s role as a spy does not assert a political agenda for espionage. Spying at first sight provides a comfort zone for Henry to enjoy, utilize, and maximize his invisibility and inarticulateness as a Korean American. Using the spy story as a metaphor or a mask for his antihero, Lee moves beyond the simplicity of espionage and sophisticates the novel by unfolding the unbalanced racial politics, questioning the national suspicion against Asian Americans’ ability of assimilation, and deconstructing the legitimation of assimilation as well as the validity of ethnic Bildungsromans.

The ability to speak perfect English signals assimilation and verifies Americanness, whiteness in particular. It is a message that is unequivocally imparted throughout the novel, if not until the end. Having been called by his wife a yellow peril and neo-American (C. Lee 5), Henry is not a hardcore assimilationist; but there is no question that he and his family are financially successful and thus model minorities. The novel starts with Lelia’s leaving, which is caused by their son’s death, alongside Henry’s restraint, passivity, and cryptic management of

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<sup>16</sup> Crystal Parikh documented this historical event: “Lee was arrested on 10 December 1999 and charged in a fifty-nine-count indictment with compromising U.S. security, under the terms of the federal Espionage Act and the Atomic Energy Act. Although the investigation of Lee focused on him as a potential spy, he was not charged with passing nuclear secrets; the indictment indicated, however, that the security breaches had ‘secure[d] an advantage to a foreign nation’ . . . . Lee pled guilty to only one of the charges, was sentenced to time already served, made himself available for questioning, and agreed to drop any countercharges that he was being prosecuted because of his Chinese ethnicity” (132).

his espionage job as well as his feelings. Henry's secludedness about his job is not only a matter of work ethic; it is inherited from his immigrant father, who would never talk to his son about his work, even after the robbery that happened to his grocery store. Henry never learns why his father gives up his future as an engineer in Korea and moves to America. There is no doubt that Henry is assimilated; but his assimilation does not originate from a complete erasure and negation of his Korean heritage, but firstly from a professional proficiency of the English language. Language is centric to the novel. Henry's masterfulness with the language defines him as a neo-American—"a someone ... Koreans were becoming, the latest brand of an American...from the future" (C. Lee 139). Henry's bravura writing skills have earned him good names in the office from his boss. His daily registers are used as textbook samples for their workaday narrative. They are taped on the wall and have invited somewhat harmless racist jokes from his coworkers, such as "*Teacher's pet*," "*Korean geek*," and "*Oh what talent*" (C. Lee 170; italics original). Excelling at writing compensates for his childhood trauma of silence. Henry remembers that he "used to wish that [he] were more like [his] Jewish and Italian friends, or even the black kids who hung out in front of [his] father's stores; [he] was envious of how they'd speak so confidently, so jubilantly celebrate the fact with their hands and hips and tongues, letting it all hang out...for anybody who'd look and listen" (C. Lee 182). The childhood memory of being "raised to speak quietly and little" (C. Lee 182) reinforces Henry's deliberation of enunciating Lelia's name precisely when they meet at Nil's party for the first time. Henry explains that in Korean "there are no separate sounds for L and R" (C. Lee 233). His deliberation enables Lelia to mark him down as a non-native speaker (C. Lee 12). Henry's commitment to the language proves that "[t]he ability to control language and space, to wit the language of space, imbues a person with the capacity not only to forge an identity but also to wield that identity with

power, power that is, as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, the ‘ability to achieve purpose’” (J. Lee 248).

Henry does not become an English language expert naturally. Schooled by speech and language experts, Henry is “saved from the wild” (C. Lee 232), where the pronunciations of P and F, R and L, B and V are torture for its inhabitants. Henry remembers how he feels ashamed by his parents’ “fumbling in front of strangers” (234) and how he weeps because his father displaces “red” with “led.” In the memory of being called “Marble Mouth” and “China boy” by his classmates in grade school, Henry struggles to find his own voice via his attempt to speak Standard English. Henry figures that the class is set up “by the grace of either too much institutional frustration or goodwill” (235), or in other word, due to a national willingness to assimilate its subjects. But language is not the only tool that defines non-native speakers like Henry. The complexion itself is enough a symbol of Asians’ incapability to assimilate into the mainstream American society, where belonging is never posed as a problem to Henry’s native-born white classmates like Alice Eckles. Punctilious about her pronunciations and only focusing on the teacher, the baby-blue-cardigan Alice speaks in a “lowing rhythm of ennui and supremacy she lorded over” the rest of the class (234). Alice’s “height and beauty and the oniony sheen of her skin” give her the privilege to sneer at Henry when he has to leave for his Remedial Speech class with “the school retards, the mentals, the losers...who just couldn’t say the words,” most of who come from difficult family backgrounds (234-35). Henry’s experience as a non-native speaker is not all different from that of Lelia’s students.

Though both model minorities, Henry’s family is often compared to John Kwang in order to showcase the differences between alienated and assimilated first-generation Korean Americans. As a first-generation immigrant, “a kind of aging soldier of this life, a squat, stocky-

torsoed warrior, bitter, never self-pitying, fearful, stubborn, world-fucking heroic” (C. Lee 48), Henry’s father is representative of his country fellows, who work their way to success in the adopted country. The compiled lives on the list of Kwang’s Korean money club, *ggeh*, all so resemble one another that Henry recognizes them and claims that “[t]he story is mine”:

How I come by plane, come by boat. Come climbing over a fence. When I get here, I work. I work for the day I will finally work for myself. I work so hard that one day I end up forgetting the person I am. I forget my wife, my son. Now, too, I have lost my old mother tongue. And I forget the ancestral graves I have left on a hillside of a faraway land, the loneliest stones that each year go unblessed. (279)

Claiming it is hard to stay Korean in America, Henry’s father acknowledges the “inalienable rights of the immigrant” that can be achieved through “certain rules of engagement” (47): work hard, focus on his own life, leave others alone, do not make any noise and “[*k*]eep it quiet” since “[*n*]obody give tow damn about your problem or pain” (182; italics original). It is a lesson of survival for immigrants in the States. As a workaholic, father does not care about what he does for a living since the notion of career is “too costly for a man like him” (57).

Comparing Asian household to a “[d]iscipline farm[s]” (C. Lee 173) for fostering federal agents, Dennis Hoagland, Henry’s boss at Glimmer and Co., delivers a vivid picture of Asian American households. Suspected as paradigmatic of Orientalism, such a trope is authorized by Chang-rae Lee to crystallize and solidify the Asian American household experienced by Henry with his own family. However distant from the American definition of being American, it is the discipline that helps the Henry-like fit in the American society and become a talented spy. The metaphor of spies seems to wonderfully explain Henry’s accomplishment as an assimilationist and a model minority. To be fair, nonetheless, his role as a spy “is not a schizophrenic detraction

from his private struggles to be the model father, son, and husband” (J. Lee 247). The occupational designation for Henry as a spy is perfected by his silence and self-control that are both honored legacies of Korean Americans and requirements for a spy, “whose racially determined invisibility signals not license but a debilitating erasure of self and power” (Chen 638). James K. Lee regards spies as

the nation’s hidden “fix,” those who under cover of anonymity and normality look for, evaluate, and eventually eliminate people who pose potential or actual threats. And by constructing an Asian American spy as the novel’s protagonist, Lee alludes to the structural role that Asian Americans have served as the nation’s Ariel in contemporary racial debates, used to justify, for example, the dismantling of affirmative action programs, the delegitimation of social welfare, and the acceleration of state punishment to solve social problems. (247)

However, working for a private, information-gathering company that “pledged allegiance to no government ... weren’t...political creatures...weren’t patriots” or “heroes” (C. Lee 17), Henry alleges his own detachment from any national agency. Even the language used for his commentary on his subjects to the company stays neutral. Henry writes and records the subject like “some sentient machine of transcription” that “won’t employ anything that even smacks of theme or moral” (C. Lee 203). Spying in Henry’s eyes is a science, private and apolitical. In the role of spying, Henry has to become a “*clean writer*” of the subject’s esoterica (C. Lee 203; italics original), detached, observing, emotionless.

Henry’s cut-and-dried writing style mirrors the general locution of the novel and is attuned to the Korean American household represented by Henry’s family. A lack of a frisson permeates the novel, of which the plot is “driven by the silence of a Korean family”

(Klinkenborg 77). Cultivating Henry's capability to be a good spy, silence is rendered honorable by Henry's Korean parents but meanwhile reckoned as a cultural deficiency by the American majority. The sporadic insertion of Korean songs, legends, and proverbs through Henry's parents and even councilman John Kwang confirms that the Korean familial heritage is not built upon audacious and straightforward narratives, but koans and silence (Klinkenborg 77). Maintaining that "*San konno san itta*"—"Over the mountains there are mountains," Koreans believe that "suffering is the noblest art, the quieter the better" (C. Lee 333), which explains why Henry's mother would rather risk ruining his birthday cake than ask her white neighbors for eggs or baking powder. The Korean folk song, *Arirang*, epitomizes the national existentialistic belief: "Everyone dies but one. And the one has little to live for" (C. Lee 299); ergo, all a person should care about is his own little family.

The emotional remoteness, aloofness and detachment of Henry and his family is squarely the conundrum of Henry's marriage, which symbolizes the conflicts between two cultures—American and Korean. It is also this persona of Henry that makes some critics deem him as a cosmopolitan spy whose "debriefings dwell on the resilient idiolect of strangeness" (Moraru 68). But Henry does not embrace this feature of Asianness. He sometimes rejects it; but in the meantime, it is undeniable and inherent in him. He continually faces challenges about the Koreanness from two extreme figures of the conflicting cultures, Lelia and *Ahjuhma*.

*Ahjuhma*, the nameless woman brought home by Henry's father from Korea after his mother's death, serves as more like a maid and housekeeper rather than a family member<sup>17</sup> and remains nameless throughout the novel. The modalities of silence are reduced and simplified to nearly muteness of *Ahjuhma*, who does not speak a word of English. The limitation of language

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<sup>17</sup> It is unstated whether or not *Ahjuhma* is Henry's stepmother. But the sporadic intimacy observed by Henry between her and his father seems to suggest so. Henry suspects that they are lovers (C. Lee 68).

capability confines her entirely to the household. Her limited activities and non-American behaviors turn her into a bizarre “total alien” (C. Lee 78). Until the day she dies, she is never seen talking to any American or taking any attempt to assimilate into the American society. Similar to Asian American women writers, Lee does “question the authority of language” or “speak to the resources as well as the hazards of silence” (K. Cheung 3) amply embodied by Ahjuhma; nevertheless, he does so by inviting Lelia—the interloping white Other—into this mission because the possible translator, Henry, is long discouraged by his Korean schooling to break the silence of the “alien.” It is Lelia who urges Henry to care about Ahjuhma and even tries to reach out to her, but only to no avail. Instead, Lelia is execrated by Ahjuhma, who calls her “*nasty American cat!*” (C. Lee 71; italics original). Recognizing Ahjuhma as a grown-up “abandoned girl” (C. Lee 73), Lelia professes that Ahjuhma is not a mystery to her, thus not an alien. Lee does not explicate how Lelia acknowledges this awkward presence of Koreanness as familiar and even decipherable. The connection between Lelia and Ahjuhma—no matter how Ahjuhma reprobates it—is concealed to Henry, who requests no elucidations from Lelia about her discovery. In this modality of silence, Henry is the one who is left out: by simply perceiving Ahjuhma and father the way they are, Henry takes no attempt to seek resolutions for the silent existential form of Koreans in America. His own silence towards their silences, however, substantiates the force of his Korean heritage while Lelia tries to break such a heritage by dint of her liberal conscience and white power as a free-speaking, middle-class American woman. In such contrast between Ahjuhma, Henry and Lelia, the inarticulate Korean peculiarity of Ahjuhma and Henry becomes a synecdoche for the larger Korean community that is perceived by the American society as an alien intrusion into the vocal American vernacular.

If Henry is choked by his inarticulate heritage and struggling to fight for his own voice, John Kwang serves as a foil to Henry. Kwang does not resemble any typical Korean immigrant like Henry's parents or Ahjuhma. He is portrayed with respect and honor, the model of model minorities, but different from all other Koreans and is situated against the most abject feature of Koreanness—silence—displayed in Henry's parents and other Korean Americans. He has an ambition that Henry does not envision “as something a Korean man would find significant or worthy of energy and devotion” (C. Lee 139). The “dragon-slayer” (37) John Kwang is esteemed not only by Asian Americans, but also by blacks and whites. As a first-generation immigrant, Kwang steals away to America, grows up in a Catholic orphanage, where he picks up a “new home language,” goes to Fordham for JD-MBA, and becomes a councilman, “a self-made millionaire” (211, 23). Kwang's “beautiful, formal English,” though sometimes tainted with a Freudian slip that reveals “a foreigner's simplicity” (23, 178), registers a prerequisite for a minority politician. He has won reverence from Henry because “he didn't seem afraid” like Henry's father and mother, “who were always wary of those who would try to shame...or mistreat” them (139). Kwang's life before his fall symbolizes how model minorities become the models and what American citizenship imposes upon its immigrant and alien constituents—an ideological consent.

Though Kwang is often conjured by Henry as a contrast to his silent father, he is never put on the same stage with Henry for immediate comparison. Kwang is intended to educate Henry and certainly the reader as well. The difference between Kwang and Henry as well as his father lies not only in their ways of grappling with the voice of the self, but also in whose voice they endeavor to speak. Henry's father never ventures to step out his comfort zone of his property. The only time he tries is to complain to a boy's mother about her son's misbehavior of

bullying Henry, but in an awkwardly humble, stumbling manner: ““My son is no good for friends”” (C. Lee 104), which confuses the boy’s mother and gives more reasons for the boy to assume his power over Henry. Henry’s voice is only substantially heard through his writing or in private settings and delivers his own aloof personal interests not only in his family but also in the politics of the day. To Kwang, being a minority politician means dealing with “the adjutant interest groups, the unwavering agenda, the stridency, the righteousness” and being “[a] lover of the public. An underdog champion” (139). Though he epitomizes model minorities and the success of assimilation, Kwang does not magnify straight-line assimilation in his political campaign. He is not only unafraid of putting himself on the public stage, but also “unafraid to speak the language like a Puritan and like a Chinaman and like every boat person in between” (304). Kwang’s success as a minority politician originates from his belief in America, which he deems “as a part of him” (211); but meanwhile he believes that it is the same country that rejects the inclusion of Asian Americans in its most internal decisive system. Asian Americans still leave unmarked in the constitutional establishment of the United States. The old syntax of American politics only acknowledges whites and blacks despite the altering demographical landscape. Kwang is a combination of both American ideological consent and the racial Other’s strategic protest against this consent. Through Kwang’s expostulation, Lee examines the self-conflict within the national ideological apparatus that provokes assimilation and excommunicates its assimilated components at the same time. Through Kwang’s heteroglossia, Lee teaches Henry, who still shatters whenever hearing “the strains of a different English” (304), that assimilation does not parallel extinction of the minority Self. The first stage of Henry’s Bildung is thus accomplished.

Kwang's ultimate destruction and expulsion from the country develops and finalizes Henry's education. The banner that reads "AMERICA FOR AMERICANS" and the chanting, "We want our fucking future back," alongside aspersions upon the multi-ethnic police troops formed in racist slangs, such as "white trash," "Spanish niggers," and "greasy gooks" (C. Lee 330-31), buck up the American nativism to prevent the national identity from being colored. The possibility of becoming an American and representing America once again is proved slim to minorities. As David Palumbo-Liu observes:

[I]t is no accident that the possibilities for representing an Asian-American Self as no longer subordinate to, but part of, the dominant Other are sustained most vigorously in the realm of art, and particularly in the world of fiction—for it is there that the Asian-American subject can partake of the unity and authority (thought to be) enjoyed by the Other by authoring a Self that can share (at least provisionally) the imaginative power of the Other, and likewise predicate a subjectivity unbounded by race and ethnicity. Nevertheless, the dominant Other has one power inaccessible to the minority Self—it can withhold such possibilities and foist upon the minority Self a set of predetermined and necessarily limited sites of representation. ("The Minority Self as Other" 76)

Yet, Henry's education is never fully accomplished. Quitting the spying job is a message of Henry's transformation that runs the gamut from an indifferent, self-centered individualist to a member of a collective cultural identity. The transformed Henry, who used to "cringe and grow ashamed and angry at those funny tones of ... father and his workers, all that Konglish, Spanglish, Jive" (C. Lee 337), now want to hear and bear heteroglossic vernacular English and embrace them all. By playing the Speech Monster at Lelia's ESL class, however, Henry cannot

yet help Lelia's immigrant students to connect his voice with his face. The connection between the Asian features and the American identity is still lingered, suspended, and thus unnatural. Henry at the novel's end appears happy but confused; with no job, no goals in life, his self-identification is imbued with Lelia's English education of the non-native speakers, a perpetuated ideological project sanctioned by the English-dominated nation. In Henry's feeble resistance by quitting his job as a spy, his confusion is entangled with the racial Other's compliance to the same assimilation system. The notion of *telos* that is accumulated of traceable effects and enabled in the Bildungsroman is delayed instead of denied in Henry's confusion; but it is the same confusion that keeps this novel out of the domain of the anti-Bildungsroman. The stage of completion is left unanswered and the power of the Self remains unfound. In Henry's transformation, the Bildung and the anti-Bildung are intertwined; but neither is completed yet. The power is located neither in Asian American collective awareness nor Henry's individual subjectivity. The power that ought to be obtained as the telos, either by the Asian American community at large as the ethnic Bildungsroman suggests or the societal maverick subject as the anti-Bildungsroman claims, dwells in the white-dominant American society. However, Henry's confusion is perhaps the lesson he needs to learn to be a transformed Korean in America.

## Chapter Three

## Contradiction Fiction: When Realism Is Not Enough

*I. Asian America as a Modern Phenomenon*

A discussion on Asian American modernity and its meaning to Asian American studies was launched as early as the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, it may have happened even earlier than this. David Palumbo-Liu recorded that in 1928, the Chicago school sociologist Robert E. Park has argued about the modernity of Asian America (*Asian/American* 82). Race, according to Park, is a premodern phenomenon but carried into the modern civilization. The existence of this mordant premodern tension has generated “a particular crisis”—today our fancy term for it is “cultural hybrid”—“for the modern nation, which must now negotiate not only cultural complications brought on by migrancy but racial ones as well” (Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* 82). The racialized Asian American individual subject as a modern product of the cultural hybrid becomes the “marginal man” that must continually re-adjust oneself to the modern ferment of economic competition (Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* 83) and geographical instability, or as we call it, the modernity of Asian America, which differentiates modern Asian American literature from its early modality.

The main difference between contemporary Asian American novelists and the early ones, as I see it, resides in their perspectives of the so-called Asian American subject and its qualification. While “the Asian American articulation in the 1960s and 1970s generally refused to center the trope of the transnational: instead, it was preoccupied with the national” (Li, “The State and Subject of Asian American Criticism” 604), the contemporary Asian American novels after the 1980s have shifted their subject matters from a nationalist claim for inclusion as an integral part of the American national discourse to a focus on the self-identifying process that

often reaches an indeterminate conclusion. Stephen Sumida summarizes two schools of Asian American literature: assimilationist and diasporic. Though the former is still dominant, the latter is becoming more commonplace. Assimilation, unequal to Americanization, is as a matter of fact Asian Americanization for its involvement of the belief that “a character is positioned along a spectrum, with being ‘Asian’ on the one end and being ‘American’ on the other” (Sumida, “Immigration” 362). The definition of assimilation was earlier refined by Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups *acquire* the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life” (Palumbo-Liu 297; emphasis mine). The word *acquire*, meaning “to get as one’s own” and “to gain the ownership of (by one’s own exertions or qualities)” (OED), possesses certain ambiguity. Accordingly, assimilation is an absorption and revision of both Eastern and Western versions of the self—they are assumed antithetical by all means, both physical and psychic contents, including “memories, sentiments, attitudes” (Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* 297). Sumida, however, proposes an alternative to the assimilation framework of identifying and examining Asian American literature of immigration, which is “dialogical, diachronic pluralism” (“Immigration” 367). He points out that “culture and identity consist not in things, artifacts, and traits but in history, narrative, and memory”: therefore, rather than repeating and preserving old customs and traits, “*continuity means change*” in Asian American cultural productions (“Immigration” 367-368; emphasis original). Based on Sumida’s observation, Asian American literature is congenitally transnational, transpacific, and diasporic. The modern phenomenon does not become *modern* but remains *traditional* ever since Asia’s “intrusion” into America. So please allow me to say that the cultural phenomenon of Asian America has already and always featured modernity.

However, it does not mean that such an assumption is so flawless, thorough, or comprehensive that it determines and unifies the forms of Asian American literature. At the very least the modernity of Asian America upon birth cannot explain why autobiographical elements overpowered other literary genres in early Asian American literature; why fictions have taken over the literary field; why identity has now become a new universal phenomenon of the subject matter of Asian American fictions; why the community life has been replaced by individual frustration as the subject matter of Asian American fictions; and why the persona of a representative Asian America/n has sometimes disappeared from contemporary Asian American fictions. I simply intend to suggest that modernity is already and always an existential phenomenon in the domain of Asian America since the first troupe of Asians came to the United States. Asian America itself is a modern phenomenon.

## *II. Contradictions under Transnationalism*

The fictional term I speak of in this chapter, *contradiction*, reflects an inherent self-presentation shared by contemporary Asian American novelists. It is the third stage of the ongoing history of Asian American fictions. What distinguishes it from the previous two categories depends on how *contradiction* is defined. I am not saying that there is no contradiction in the survival and transformation novels. Contradictions create novels. Be it a physical or mental contradiction, if there is no contradiction, there will be no novels. Therefore, with no doubt, all Asian American fictions possess and portray contradictions. The third category of Asian American literature in my terminology refers to *contradictions* in the mode of cognition and the form of narrative. Whereas the mode of cognition is determined by the political and economic disequilibrium between the postmodern America and the neocolonial Asian Pacific, I

reference the form of narrative to the oscillation between literary realism and modernism. These two paradigms of contradictions reciprocate and complete one another and help the reader understand the shifted subject matters of Asian American fictions without minimizing the specific historicity of every shift that sometimes is blurred in the narrative of the writer. The first paradigm will be covered in this section and the second one is about to be discussed in the next section.

Prior to Sumida's emphasis on the significance of a transnational purview of Asian American literary studies, Asian Americanists in ethnic studies, sociology and anthropology have written about this modern phenomenon that occurs in the transpacific space. The particularity of such a space, though created simultaneously during the process of American modernization, commodification, and capitalization, is differentiated from the mainstream American modernist descriptions. While Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson and David Harvey focus on the universalizing, totalizing, and homogenizing momentum of capitalism, the vast population dwelling in the transpacific, diasporic, and transnational space is forgotten. This political unconscious faux pas, ironically, demonstrates its own effectiveness in erasing the dissenting heterogeneity of the Asian American population from the ideological stage of American modernity. As Grace K. Hong argues, modernism is "limited to an Anglo-American intellectual tradition, and thus we must remember that the postmodern forms that [Jameson] reads as reacting against this specific mode of modernism compose likewise a very particular tradition that does not encompass all forms of culture" (112).

Hong recognizes Jameson and Harvey's identification of postmodernism with certain political economic practices known as "flexible accumulation." In Hong's definition, *flexibility*, refers to "the fetishization of differences seen in late twentieth-century discourses" (110), and

retains the logic that attempts to universalize and unify the differentiated forms of production. Under this logic, “flexible accumulation disrupts developmental temporality by using ‘modern’ alongside ‘nonmodern’ forms of production, pastiche recycles and recirculates styles from a variety of eras” (113). Hong exemplifies the inequity within the territory of American capitalism across the Pacific Ocean in a comparison between anti-consumerism exposed by John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* and consumerism described in Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeater*, the latter of which demonstrates that though the U.S. imperialism failed eventually to clench the Asian Pacific territory, “its imperial experiment in the Philippines produced the technologies of neocolonialism that made consumerism a *more*, rather than *less*, important category. U.S. neocolonialism became a way of extending the ideal of consumerism as citizenship all over the world” (120; emphasis original). The contradictions within consumerism consequently subsist between the two coasts cross the Pacific Ocean, the post-Fordist America and the neocolonial Asian Pacific, the white labor and the labor of color, and the residents and immigrants inside the physical boundaries of the United States.

The transnational features of Asian diasporas in the U.S. further confirm and concretize the contradictions within the American borders. Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu jointly clarify the definition of *diaspora* by dismissing certain members of relocated Asians that do not share the diasporic sensibility, take a diasporic position, or claim a diasporic identity. Diasporization of Asians are bounded to displacement in multifarious forms, including “political economic inequities in the globe, social inequalities in multiple host and origin societies, and cultural barriers that impede belonging to the place diasporic Asians inhabit and the place they call homeland” (Parreñas and Siu 12). As a project of modern racial construction across borders, diasporas reference their relationships *elsewhere*: the duality of the point of departure and

destination of arrival resides in the imaginary homeland, from which diasporas are continuously displaced and are never able to return to. The marginal inclusion arbitrates the displacement of diasporas and their malleable identifications. Asian diasporic subjects are not necessarily economically underprivileged; but they are inevitably historicized by colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization that stipulate their formation under the influence of ongoing, contested, and negotiated relationships among nations and between peoples. As a consequence, their dual identification or double consciousness is ingrained in their ways of living and modes of self-cognition.

Determined by the increasing contradiction within self-identification, the theme of subject formation, to which realism is devoted, becomes less coherent in Asian American writing practice, not mentioning that today's writers have, to a large extent, lost interest in the mimesis of reality. Realist writings are still extended to today's literature by many Asian American writers; but the uncertainty and inclusiveness that are featured in modernism can be even spotted occasionally in the realist text. Notwithstanding the modernist activities of insertion, intrusion, and domination in Asian American literature, the act of Asian American writing should presumably always in some way reflect upon its origin in the U.S. racialization and Asian American subject formation and open up a cycle of inquiries that none of the modern writers are allowed to forget. While modernism authorizes a replacement of collective experiences by individuated matters in modern Asian American literature, Asian American critics are juggling with the incoming *crisis* that a separation is taking place between what is in conformity with the original intent and what has irrevocably fallen away from the source of Asian American studies. It becomes further complicated when historical, philosophical, sociological, and psychological

approaches to literature become so redundant that no literary criticism is believed to be apolitical and every act of writing is put into question by its relationship to its specific ideological intent.

The cognitional mode of Asian American subject matters has thus been altered for several reasons. The intricacy of these reasons, which are philosophical, sociological, historical, or ethnological, etc., does not allow me to cover them all due to my disciplinary limitations. But in terms of literary studies, literary criticism has become an asset to literature as a whole, especially Asian American literature. Literature may have not stopped being a purely artistic human science; literary studies, however, “cannot possibly refuse to take cognizance of” the existence of criticism (de Man 8). Modern Asian American literature of realism, modernism, or postmodernism is written with such knowledge and even borrows the language from its criticism. At this point, when realism loses its place in criticism, so does it in literature. The society described in modern Asian American literature is at the same time familiar and distant, recognizable and unfathomable. Unable to make any valid statement about such a society, the observing subject is not clear about his attitude toward his Self. The double confusion of the subject’s cognition cannot accomplish a self-demystification by the end of the modern novel despite all the observations of the subject’s social self. Such a mode of cognition cannot find a place in realism, which clears the way for modernism to take over the territory of contemporary Asian American fictions.

But there is still a demand for realism in Asian American literary production and it does not solely stem from the debate between realists and modernists. The antiquated realism does not forfeit its right to modernism just because we conclude somehow modernism is much better than realism. Even on home turf of modernism, realism finds its own spot here and there in Asian

American literature. Why is realism still unforgettable to Asian American writers? One needs to find the explanations from the paroxysmal criticism of modernism.

### *III. "Colorless" Modernism against Realism*

The notion of modernism is a rich one and the definitions and paradigms of it vary; but it is always examined in contrast to realism and naturalism. Among the most widely cited critics is Georg Lukács because of his stark objection to modernism, which, according to him, is a "modern bourgeois anti-realistic movement" (*Realism in Our Time* 47). In favor of Thomas Mann over Franz Kafka, or "the panoramic and clear-headed bourgeois realist" (Leslie 125) over the summoner of negation, alienation, fragmentation, and other modern insanity, Lukács has certainly made a distinction between modernism and realism. Critics of Lukács concede that modernism is also "an art of the real" (Leslie 126) because capitalism has created a fragmented world and the modernist reflection of such fragmentation and alienation verifies the ability and reality that modernism contributes to the exactness of such an attribute and meanwhile the vicissitudes of human history. One of the most famous debates about realism versus modernism happens between Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, who linger on the capabilities of realism and modernism to represent the totality of society. While Lukács insists that modernism features pessimism, irrationality, fragmentation, or subjectivism and these characteristics determine the inability of modernism to represent the totality and human rationality, Brecht believes that the art form must be brought into line with the altered historical reality and thus raises the question as to whether the historical moment is the same as the realistic period. Lukács's excoriation of modernism is ascribed by his antagonists to his assurance that the "close integration" and the "'totality' of the capitalist system, of bourgeois society, with its unity of economics and

ideology...form an objective whole, independent of consciousness”; to suggest that this totality does not apply to the capitalism of the modern age denies Marxist criticism because, according to Marx, “the relationship of every society form a whole” (Lukács, “Realism in Balance” 31).

Lukács thus concludes, modernism is based on nihilism and the angst that dominates the modernist writing entails a loss of “any concern for ethic complexity” (*Realism in Our Time* 83).

Paul de Man gives a circumstantial analysis and insightful critique of Lukács’s defense of realism and reprimand of modernism by re-addressing the genre of fictions. Empathetic with Lukács’s ambition in demonstrating the universal application of the novel, de Man confirms that the novel “remains rooted...in the particularity of experience; as an epical genre, it can never give up its contact with empirical reality, which is an inherent part of its own form” (55).

However, de Man believes that the polemic in Lukács’s argument against modernism is possibly caused by the fact that he overlooks the reality of our world and considers the world as remaining the same as the Don Quixotic time when the world is no longer as idealistic as we wish it to be. To reflect on the time of objectification, alienation, and fragmentation, the novel is obliged to “represent this reality as imperfect, as steadily striving to move beyond the boundaries that restrict it, as constantly experiencing and resenting the inadequacy of its own size and shape” (55). However, de Man accredits Lukács’s dogmatic commitment to realism because the insistence of realism “on the necessary presence of an empirical element in the novel is altogether convincing, all the more so since it is counterbalanced by the attempt to overcome the limitations of reality” (55-56). At the meantime, he criticizes the fashion of naming literature modernism in the 1960s when the same term was used as “a device for historical periodization” (142). He calls for attention that being modern as a historical reality conflicts with thinking and writing about modernity. Aware that it is impossible “to forget the past in the name of history,

because both are linked by a temporal chain that gives them a common destiny” (150), de Man maintains that in an impasse where modernity meets history, modernists write about experiences which are not necessarily modern. Therefore, destined to diagnose and describe the predicament of our own modernity, literature has always been inherently modern because literature corresponds immediately to the mode of being.

Rather than being confined to the framework of the authenticity and reality to define or degrade modernism, Martin Humpál contributes to distinguishing between these two forms from a socio-historical perspective: it is the contrast between private and public spheres that tell them apart. Borrowing Randall Stevenson’s theory of window/prism<sup>1</sup>, Humpál explains that the realist window uses “the same transparent material” (23) that is public, mimetic, conventional, whereas the language material used for the modernist prism is private, individual, uniquely distorted and fragmented. The modernist work “‘presents’ or ‘expresses’” rather than *representing* “in the realistic sense of the word” (Humpál 23). Therefore, the modernists “look for beauty in the eminently modern, that is, in the immediately present, transitory and contingent” (24). The purpose of the modernist rejection of realist traditions is twofold: to emancipate the private unique beauty from the public conventions of bourgeois culture and discourse, and to incite “an attack on the very foundation of modernity: reason” (24).

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<sup>1</sup> Stevenson compares Henry James and James Joyce in order to exemplify the differences between realists and modernists. He maintains that though Henry James’s language is sometimes criticized for being opaque, the writer himself explains that he simply looked out of the various windows in “the house of fiction” and each window is made of transparent glass (Stevenson 168). Stevenson writes, “What especially interested James was the different points of view and angles of observation each window offered for surveying the fictional sense: it did not immediately concern him that the glass might refract or colour the scene observed” (168). On this front, Joyce pledged an opposite opinion: for him, language is never straightforward and transparent as a window, but a prism, “colouring, shaping or even obscuring what is being observed...Readers of Joyce no longer simply look through the window, but also have to examine the glass. As Joyce himself explained, ‘it is the material that conveys the image...that interests you’, however fascinating the image itself.” (Stevenson 168).

Whether Henry James was a modernist or realist is still in debate. It is beyond my survey. But the metaphors of “window” and “prism” help to identify and distinguish modernism from realism.

Tony Jackson is not an obsessed trend follower as other critics. He places his focus on the connection between realism and modernism, and addresses a continuation from the previous literary form—realism—to the more recent one—modernism. While Humpál’s private-vs.-public theory of differentiation speaks for a mainstream debate over modernism and realism, Jackson undertakes the literary activity of differing modernism and realism from a psychological and chronic angle. He approaches Paul de Man, Fredric Jameson, Georg Lukács, and Jacques Lacan by grounding the literary trends in the domain of psychology, desire, and unconsciousness, and emphasizes the function of the self that plays in realist and modernist fictions. In Jackson’s review, de Man reinstates the “ongoing self-productivity of literature” and puts an end to “the linear narrative structure that typically inhabits diachronic history” (4) through separating literature from its responsive time period. The problem of de Man, Jackson maintains, lies in his conflation of the process and the result of discovering: the process of discovering retains a certain factor of historical timing while what is discovered is the literary quality or features in general (10). For Jackson, the differentiation of modernism from any other literary forms stems from its *discovery* of literary desire and its regarding itself as making this discovery (10). It is the unconscious continuation of *discovery*—the nature of the narrative—that enables a transformation of literature. Whether it is public or private, synchronic or diachronic, the distinction between realism and modernism is not at all absolute. In a word, Jackson refuses to operate a clean cut between these two forms because on the one hand, from a synchronic perspective, the present does not complete its organic evolution from the past, and on the other hand, the past does not parallel the present; “then in order for the present knowledge to establish its validity as a general claim, it must show itself to have been there in the past all along” (11), and no matter what genre a novel adopts for its narrative, there is always an essential self-image

in the novel that reflects self-unconsciousness. Fredric Jameson, avoiding a conventional, genetic way around this turbulence, makes the coherence between realism and modernism more fundamental by dwelling on the historical specificities that are always used to separate them. He asserts that modernism is equally defense and denunciation of realism while realism is “inseparable from the development of capitalism, the quantification by the market system of the older hierarchical or feudal or magical environment, and thus that both are intimately linked to the bourgeoisie as its product and its commodity” (“Beyond the Cave” 8-9).

The contention over modernism among all the literary critics and modernists arrives at a central concurrence that centers on the nature of the novel: by dealing with subjectivity and consciousness and shifting from the general, external social relationships to the specific, internal space, the novel becomes *modern*. This consent offers an explanation to the disclosed and indeterminate form of modern fictions. James Mellard perceives the disparate concepts of mode existent in the modern phase and theorizes this condition from a reader-response perspective by coping with the dynamics between the author and the reader: in the traditional novel-as-genre, “authors through novels imitated the world, and readers tested them against that world” (Mellard 17). The traditional text can be reduced to meaning and enables a unified interpretation and hence a representation. The traditional relationship between the author and the reader is consequently that of the author and the world too. For the modernist text, however, the question of the ontological being stands “in the gap between the author’s text (which has projected a consciousness) and the reader’s consciousness” (18). Mellard furthers his observations of the modernist production by dividing modernist writing into three phases: naivety, sophistication, and consolidation. While the naïve phase is as solar as “a projection into the underdetermined historical ‘field,’ ...made up of underdetermined texts, of the principles of formalist criticism,”

the maturation transforms American modernist fiction into “a galaxy of modes” through a process of self-questioning and self-conscious (19-20). The latest phase of American modernism experiences “generic permutation” (21) of fragments that coalesce with locutions and themes outside the conventional genre of fiction. The three modalities of modernism in American literary history demonstrate an “over-accelerating movement away from the exploding center of the traditional form” (21).

Modernism in Asian American fiction has experienced the first two phases; the third phase of modernism may have appeared in Asian American literary history<sup>2</sup>, but it is certainly not the trend. Despite the fact that realism is wonderfully suitable to maintain the theme of Asian American nationalism, modernism has its certain ways to fit in the tradition of Asian American fiction, but with disturbance: the nature of modernism determines to undo the work of demystification accomplished by realism. It is an open question whether it is time for modernism to take over Asian American writings when the mission of locating Asian America on the U.S. national cultural spectrum still faces challenges. For one thing, in its escape from realism to modernism, the mainstream American literary criticism has not lost its faith in its traditional ideology. It does not take too attentive a reading of the American literary history to understand why the modernist metaphysics is unable to explain the dominant historical, empirical, and materialistic tradition of Asian American literature in the clamant facet of modernist amalgamation. It should not surprise us that no modernist theories and discussions have involved

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<sup>2</sup> *Dictee* is the third type modernist. Lisa Lowe in particular suggests so because of its “unfaithful relationship to realist aesthetic values” (*Immigrant Acts* 130). The student “internalizes the pedagogical mandate” that reproduces conformity to traditions through the dictation exercise (131). But the logic of dictation provides “a critique of the model of identical equivalence” (131). Lowe explains that “the subject of *Dictee* recites poorly, stutters, stops, and leaves verbs unconjugated” and thus “through manifold deviations from the model” exploits the internal contradiction of the dictation (132).

In addition, if we examine the form of *Dictee*, it is easy to find out that the language is by no means coherent and conventional. The usage of multiple languages that are foreign to Asian American locutions and the missing punctuation marks in the text suggest a non-realist writing strategy.

Asian American literature. Not all modernist novels have been included in the modernist theoreticians' works either. Assimilation on this front has always been a one-way street that decisively confines the form of Asian American literature to realism in order to reflect the racialized civilization of Asian America and showcase what is being neglected in the mainstream American social relationships. The literary form of Asian America unexceptionally becomes the racial form of Asian American literature.

The above critics' points of departure have incidentally conjoined to point to the problematic of modernist writing, in particular when it is used to examine Asian American literature. For example, in spite of their mutual counter-arguments, Lukács and Brecht agree on the inability of modernism to signify the totality and human rationality. The term "Asian America" symbolizes and translates such totality in its own language. While the Western modernism describes a resistance to the industrialized, capitalist society that reifies and alienates human subjects, what the large entity Asian American modernism focuses on has yet to reach a consistent statement. Does modernism in Asian American literature share the same token with the Western modernism? Lisa Lowe seems to suggest so; but she has not bothered to be more explicit. Due to such vagueness and insufficient scholarship of Asian American modernism, how modernism responds to its ideological request by Asian Americanism is still hard to determine. If we use Humpál's window theory to understand Asian American realism and modernism, it is possible to find out that the contemporary Asian American novels become more private and fragmented, and less public and representative. Here is the hope of modernism in Asian American literature. By utilizing Jameson's conception of the relationship between these two forms, we come close to a more rebellious conclusion as to why modernism is taking place in Asian American literary writing: if modernism is a defense and denunciation of realism and what

it represents, what does Asian American modernist writing try to denounce? How does modernism defend the tradition of Asian American enlightenment project? Is it politically dangerous to suddenly declare the possession of individuality instead of panethnicity through a personal voice that is *à la mode* in modernism? Is it right to sweep a wave of ennui into the middle of Asian America's grand national project?

Having examined the realist necessity as Asian American racial form, I wonder how we understand the appearance of modern fiction in Asian American literature with a ready question as to what interest modernism has for Asian American literature and literary studies. That American modernist literary critics never consider Asian American writers in their discussions of American modernist representatives has proved the mainstream's overlook of Asian American literature. The sociological investigation of this crucial academic reality has already been undertaken or implied by Asian Americanists via inquiring the validity of American literature. For this reason, instead of repeating the external approaches to the literature issue of Asian America, I mean to take an internal look at the historical structure of Asian American fictions and to examine its modern phase through a series of inquiries: How does Asian American literature involve itself in the ideologically Eurocentric mode of American modernism? How does Asian American realism function in modern times? What is the relationship between Asian American realism and modernism? Will a transition from realism to modernism destruct Asian American ideology or disturb the social acclamation of Asian America? And does literary modernism conflict with Asian Americanism? Are we truly ready for Asian American modernism and even postmodernism?

#### *IV. Writing the Identity*

American realism came into being when romanticism found its nature of idealization inconsistent with an unprecedented urban reality, but Asian American literature from its inception has already and always been deeply and widely involving an urban reality. The history of Asian immigrants to the United States cannot be severed from American history of capitalist development. As part of the American capitalist system, Asian migrants were imported as cheap labor while Asia functioned as the market of raw materials and predatory dumping for the U.S. industries. This historicity of Asian America confines the majority of the Asian population to the urban space, which exists in the totality of the means. Therefore, realism has habitually been the prominent literary form that suits the concern of the pre-modern Asian immigrant population for their fundamental relationship with American capitalism and urbanization till recently when the urban America faces up to modernity and globalization. The new phenomenon features a more individualistic, private, and internal crisis of discovering and positioning the sense of self in the totality of the automatic urban civilization. When style is philosophized to mirror the psychology of capitalist production, modernism is understandably deployed by Asian American writers to portray individual subjects who used to be overwhelmed by the community sense and representable values in the early Asian American fictions. Consequently, a request for identity in Asian American fictions was accelerated to respond to modernity, in which Asian American subjects are as well involved as the mainstream cultural subjects. There was probably never a moment in art history like the twentieth century when literature is so obsessed with identity. Asian American literature, as a twentieth-century cultural accomplishment and an ontological critique of such an accomplishment, is particularly interested in identity and self-identification. The awkward, unorthodox political and historical predicament of Asians in the United States has certainly contributed to this literary theme of Asian America. Unlike the first two literary

categories that impart a message of persuasion and representation and possess a desire of meta-discursive invention, literature of identity is established on a fundamentally contradictory base that dwells in the past and meanwhile exposes a present, modern concern of individual subjects.

Stuart Hall defines identity as a production, a play, “which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (“Cultural Identity” 210). He perceives identity from two different perspectives: the cultural identity that is the shared, collective oneness, the truth, the essence, the *being*; and the other one that is fluid in context, positioned, and composed of both similarity and difference, the *becoming* (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 211-12). The United States in Hall’s theory of identity is visualized as “the space where the creolizations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated,” where none of us, be it American, African, Caucasian, French, Chinese, Jew, or Indian, originated (“Cultural Identity” 219). For the colonized subject, identity resides in *somewhere else*; the feeling of *elsewhere*, as diasporas, is quintessentially modern. Hall posits the marginalized, fragmented, alienated, disenfranchised, disadvantaged, dispersed identity in the center instead of on the margin in the British and U.S. urban spheres due to the reality that these spaces are heavily influenced by migration. The specific moment of modernity that enables recognition of a general condition of fragmentation merely brings such centralization up to surface; the deconstructing inquiry of the antithesis of marginalization and centralization consists in the immanent nature of all identity, which “is constructed across difference and begins to live with the politics of difference” (Hall, “Minimal Selves” 117). Identity has been singularized within a limited imagined community and always exists in a certain discourse because “the self is always, in a sense, a fiction, just as the kinds of ‘closures’ which are required to create communities of identification—nation, ethnic group, families, sexualities, etc.—are arbitrary closures; and the forms of political action,

whether movements, or parties, or classes, those too, are temporary, partial, arbitrary” (Hall, “Minimal Selves” 117). But the closure is not the end. By reading identity as narratives and histories, Hall argues that identity is composed of *minimal selves*: it does not possess a singular, one-dimensional label and the essential instability of every identity does not necessarily produce antagonism or binaries; instead, it is unfixed, fluid, provisional, and alterable. To apply Hall’s identity theory to Asian Americans’ self-recognitions, the group identification is not the single identity every Asian American subject owns.

E. San Juan, Jr. specifies the identity theory in the domain of Asian American subjectivity in modern times. He confirms the progress Asian American activities have made in the past, but concludes that “Asian Americans find themselves trapped in a classic postmodern predicament: essentialized by the official pluralism as formerly the ‘Yellow Peril’ and now the ‘Superminority,’ they nevertheless seek to reaffirm their complex internal differences in projects of hybrid and syncretic genealogy” (“Beyond Identity Politics” 277). With the evidence of an uprising revival of “individualist metaphysics, the most popular of which is ‘identity politics’” owing to a lack of “an alternative or oppositional strategy that can challenge the logic of liberal, possessive individualism and the seductive lure of consumerism” (282), San Juan denounces such a recourse now that it is neither able to repeat and maintain the historicity of Asian Americans’ collective resistance and revolt against the social injustice nor inclined to appreciate the concrete knowledge of politics. He criticizes Asian American modernists like Maxine Hong Kingston for her wrapping a foil around the seduction of multiculturalism through her deconstructive maneuver of rupturing an affirmative and authoritative voice to present Chinese reality and to represent the Chinese American image. He also accuses the vogue of contemporary Asian American writers’ comprehension and portrayal of the one’s ethnic identity as “an

alternative to a modernized theme of integration” (291). Having debunked all the literary activities that are in contradiction with Asian American nationalism, San Juan proposes that the mission of Asian American writers is to fulfill their social responsibility, that is, to “pursue the ‘labor of the negative’ ...to problematize the eccentric ‘and/or’ of their immigrant,” and to decolonize “heritage and ...their conjunctural embeddedness in the world-system” (292).

Based on the above argument, the move to modernism is hardly completed in the domain of Asian American literature and its criticism. But the ambivalent experience that is featured by modernity is becoming common and contagious among Asian American subjects, who share social and historical contexts different from their predecessors. What is lost in San Juan’s interrogation is its repellency of increasing inner class stratification within Asian America; he simply annihilates the fact that today’s Asian diasporas and migrants cannot be properly and reductively described as powerless. His acclamation of Asian American writing mission intentionally leaves a certain group of new immigrants, which consists of a large population of professionals with college degrees, “who entered the U.S. volitionally and who did not experience separation from the homeland” (Heinze, “A Diasporic Overcoat?” 193), outside of the Asian American imagination. The appearance of Asian American modernist writers, such as Theresa Hak Hyung Cha, Maxine Hong Kingston, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Han Ong, has disrupted the unanimity of Asian American literary form by consciously and unconsciously displaying this new phenomenon of Asian America. This is when realism ceases to satisfy.

#### *V. Realisms in Fixer Chao: Inchoate Pursuit of Modernism*

It is hard to read Han Ong’s *Fixer Chao* within Asian American critical paradigms without disrupting them. It is almost impossible to sketch a clear and concise summary that

would do justice to the complexity of the author's cynical criticism, which is obtrusively impacted by the latest Asian American criticism. It can easily give the reader an impression that, in a hackneyed expression, this novel is American literature, in which the characters happen to be of Asian ancestry.

*Fixer Chao*, authored by a 1.5th-generation Filipino immigrant, certainly accommodates Asian American political and cultural traces. Among the few Asian Americanist critics whose interest has been aroused by this novel<sup>3</sup>, Hsuan L. Hsu and Eleanor Ty have contributed to maximizing the novel's Asian Americanness. Eleanor Ty identifies and emphasizes the presence of sexuality, globalization, and racism in the novel. She notices that race plays a consequential part in William Paulinha's prostitution, in which William has to "compete with frisky Puerto Ricans and athletic black boys for a cut of the overweight white businessman business" (Ong 12). William considers himself perfect for this job because he is "a skinny colored kid, almost like the ones they see a lot of nowadays on TV, except shabbier" (Ong 12). His "mystifying face[s]" is desired for humiliation by these white businessmen, who, probably "with a bald spot in the middle of his head," have "had disastrous days and want to take out their frustration on someone" (Ong 12). Recognizing the protagonist as an abject racial other, Ty argues that moments like this scenario, which are "sometimes overt, sometimes subtle, repeated racist incidents and reminders of their otherness" (129), imply the cause for sub-citizens like William to respond with violence and resistance to the societal environment that surrounds them.

Ty's second focus is placed upon the dynamics between the East and West in the era of globalization and on the imbalance within the global market, which has yielded a hallucination of the United States and established an image of a luxury, better life in America through

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<sup>3</sup> Among over thirty entries put on this novel in the University of Washington Library website, only two of them are academic research papers. The others are simply book reviews.

symbolization of big brand names, such as “General Electric, Sunbeam, Hoover, Proctor-Silex, Pfizer, Zenith” (Ong 263; Ty 130). Through her premises that the way “culture from the Third World has been received, marketed, and commodified” in America, including the Americans’ belief in *feng shui*, surfaces the residue of Orientalism, according to which “the East is a large marketplace, a shopping paradise that enhances [the white Americans’] stature as consumer and collector” (130). The obliqueness in the international market, where America is privileged and postured for its quality and high-end products while places like Taiwan take the end of cheap manufactures, assists with a perpetuated doppelgänger of the historical victim, a role assigned to the East by the West since its colonization of Asia for the past century. The split roles between the East and West in the global capitalism help to attest the American Dream that is advertised, projected, commercialized, and objectified in order to conceal the social reality of the U.S., and is destined to a disillusion upon the arrival of the immigrants from the East. This disillusion stems from the exaggerated ideological advertisement of the United States and disjointed communications in the transit of cultural productions. Such a disjoint deprives the East of a historical and social context of America. As a result, the subjects of the neo-colonies “saw objects clearly, but had no idea of their true context, what was behind them”; as William says, “[i]t was only that these foreground details that we kept our eyes on represented, for us—my family and me—luxury. The idea of luxury. That was the most important thing for us, who believed so strongly in the categorization ‘Third World’” (Ong 262-263).

Hsu, on the other hand, fashions her reading practice with postcolonialism. She utilizes Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry and addresses the agency of the post-colonial subjects’ mimicry of the West. Mimicry, Hsu repeats, “not only has the potential to camouflage subversive weapons—it is itself an ontological weapon that undoes the very unity of Western forms:

“‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence” (Hsu 678; Bhabha 127). Through the post-colonial theory of mimicry, Hsu accentuates the agency of the suppressed Asiatic subjects during cultural assimilation process of pretending to be “docile, passive, or civilized” (678). William, according to Hsu, through passive mimicry and operational action of revenge sabotages the public and private lives of his targets and “explicitly differentiates his subversive plan from the strategies of open debate and identity politics” (680). Hsu also attempts to approach this novel through non-Asian American reading exercise by drawing on the proposition of *feng shui* and advances William’s—Han Ong’s too—criticism of the urban environment and modernization that have left no spiritual space for human beings. In the modern times of late capitalism and commercialism, the urban subjects are turned into mere objects, which are “best accessed through shopping” (Ong 299).

As Asian American critics, Ty and Hsu remain contiguous to Asian American criticism. Yet they are too distracted by the sociology-based critical theory in completing their readings of the novel. The problem with Ty’s and Hsu’s interpretations of *Fixer Chao* lies in their failure to see the whole picture of the novel; it is alright for them to focus on specificities of the novel, but their foci should not be detached from the rest of the novel and its characters. They both take “textuality” of the novel for “reality” and accidentally or conveniently cut the affiliation between the fictional text and the cultural institutions and critical authority. This accusation may sound illogical because at least Ty fully deploys Asian American cultural theories in her reading practices. But she conspicuously tends to unilaterally focus on the representativeness and mimesis of the text and overlook the actual literariness of the text. Hsu, on the other hand, though having indicated the unpopularity of the novel and its ambiguity in Asian American reading practice, leaves out a thorough close examination of the fictional characters and events.

They either forget to mention or simply intentionally neglect that the target of William's sabotage is not the white Americans, but the upper-class New Yorkers, including Asian immigrants like Suzy Yamada. If we draw the line of inquiry on the literary form of the novel, it is easier to find out that this characteristic of the novel proves the insufficiency and inadequacy of Asian American literary reading practice in reading its objects of criticism.

"Beware the life you earn" (Ong 3), beginning with a moment of rousing that implies the weary life of William Narciso Paulinha, *Fixer Chao* reminds me of Christopher Isherwood's novella, *A Single Man*. The first-person narrator lingers at the present of the narrative as a starting point for knitting together his present, his past and his dream that fantasizes a future. In his dream, he will become a typist, live in an apartment, and pay rent on time (Ong 13), neglecting the fact that it is too plain and unambitious to be called a *future*. Similar to most first-person narratives, the almost declamatory present and past tenses leave no room for unreliability and ambiguity for the reader because "there is no indication of epistemological uncertainty or inconsistency" (Heinze, "Violations of Mimetic Epistemology" 280). William, a Filipino immigrant, the anti-hero, appears in the novel as a mail clerk at Arco Oil Company, a gay hooker at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, or simply put, a nobody in New York City. He is portrayed as *modern* "as eternally and by nature solitary, extricated from all human, and in particular from all social relations, existing ontologically independent of them" (Eysteinson 26). The inwardness of the narrating subject is slung into existence with no meaning in life. The highly subjectivity of the character at the start of the novel is underlined in his awareness not of life but of fragility of it and the meaningless existence of the commonplace.

But the first-person narrative is obviously not enough to identify *Fixer Chao* with modernism. Unsurprisingly realists also take in first-person narrators; in fact, "the mode of self-

conscious narration” has always been cared for in the history of literature because “the novel has always conducted complicated transactions between its propensity toward realism, empirical detailing, the illusion of facticity, and elements of form and making involved in the realistic illusion” (Fletcher and Bradbury 395). The distinction between the realistic mode of self-narration and the modernist device, according to Fletcher and Bradbury, is that the former “served to draw attention to the autonomy of the narrator,” while the latter “drew attention to the autonomy of the fictive structure itself” (395-396). In William’s occasional stream of consciousness and the form of his consecutive inquiries of life through a set of questions, which locates the character himself in the trap of modernity, which is “a chaotic subversion of the communicative and semiotic norms of society” (Eysteinnsson 24), *Fixer Chao* seems to present an existent being through the mediating power of the self as all modernist works do.

The modernist paradigm of the novel, however, starts to stray away when William and Shem C. plan the revenge and scam. As the story goes on, realism continues to dominate the novel. Through the hoax of *feng shui*, realism is once again deployed through Ong’s fine, detailed depictions. Nevertheless, it is the same device, *feng shui*, that lends the novel a sense of mysticism. Hsuan L. Hsu introduces *feng shui* as drawing “on ancient Chinese techniques for selecting the sites of graves, houses, and other important structures—as well as Taoist principles set out in the three thousand-year-old I Ching—the system of Feng Shui is ‘of comparatively modern origin . . . almost wholly based on the teachings of Choo-he and others, who lived under the Sung dynasty (A.D.1126-1278)’” (Eitel 5; Hsu 690). The antediluvian tradition of *feng shui* from premodern China was banned by the Communist Party and the reformist government, who condemned *feng shui* as a superstition that would hinder the modernization of China. However, it survives and revives in recent years in southern China and Chinese-speaking regions, such as

Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao. Influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, each of which “brings a well-developed philosophical focus to bear on ‘nature’, the role of human beings in nature, and the meaning of existence,” *feng shui* is “a powerful shaper of space, and brings its two lens to focus on the relationship between people and nature” (Teather and Chow 310).

Dismissing the accusation of superstition, Elizabeth Teather and Chun Chow resume the environmental dimension of *feng shui* practices and rectify it from a divination tool to “an attempt to manipulate the future, by organizing one’s use of time and space in order to fit in the patterning of the universe” (312). The co-authors also point out the differences between the West and East in their compressions of *feng shui*: the West uses *feng shui* to obtain an environmental harmony and sustainability of the relationship between human and nature whereas in the East, the aim of *feng shui* practices is “to benefit an individual or, more typically, a family” (322). To practice *feng shui* and maneuver the *yin* and *yang* of the space, one’s property will be able to attract the “largest possible share of limited and clearly defined values” (Bruun 184; Teather and Chow 322).

Despite its significance in the novel, Ong’s critique is not placed on *feng shui* but on the upper-class clients of William’s *feng shui* business, including Lindsay S., Suzy Yamada, Brian Q., and Cardie Kerchpoff, who perseveringly exhibit a sustainable pursuit of wealth and health as well as an unquenchable fear of loss and failure that re-popularize and re-modernize *feng shui*. Hsuan Hsu asserts that the *feng shui* practice is mainly used among upper-class clients (690), as is described in William’s narration. In order to avenge himself and Shem C., William’s first step is to get into the inner circle of the upper class in disguise of a *feng shui* practitioner, Master Chao. Having successfully fixed Lindsay S’s residence, William and Shem are invited to a dinner party thrown by Suzy Yamada, who is a 1.5th-generation Japanese immigrant and climbs

up the social ladder in New York by using her charisma, unethical tricks, and beauty. After the party, Master Chao wins a feverish reputation through his *feng shui* practices in the upper-class New York society: William is solicited to *chao*<sup>4</sup> dozens of luxury residences of the New York socialites, interviewed and photographed by fashion magazines, and even inherits a sumptuous condo in Manhattan from a deceased, respectable client, Rowley P. Now the conundrum that disrupts the realistic components of the novel is that *feng shui* surprisingly works.

In the battle between realism and modernism, *Fixer Chao* blurs the boundaries between these two forms. With a realist style of narration, the novel contains a modernist theme. Through William, Ong accurately portrays an urban society in modern times. The existence of the city remains grounded in alienation, fragmentation, disillusionment, displacement, spiritual loneliness, separation of meanings and senses from the societal environment, breakdown of social norms, and despairing human behaviors in the face of an unmanageable future. Such feelings can never be observed, nor in any way verified or prescribed. It happens when he looks at the letters from the Philippines, feeling sad. The sadness to him is not a symptom of nostalgia; on the contrary, it is the very fact that he attempts to escape the so-called home as well as the life attached to it while not missing it a bit (Ong 17). Feeling alienated from both America and the Philippines, William sometimes searches moments of suppressing humanity and governs his actions with power of annihilation. He is in particular fond of Agatha Christie and so empathizes with the killers in her detective fiction that he does not want to finish the book in fear of having the murderers found out (Ong 38-39). This anti-hero is constantly associated with frustrations and desperations. But different from the modern anti-hero in the mainstream literature, Ong's protagonist experiences an actual alienation from himself, society and his homeland. Of the great importance is the sense of inbetweenness that is not as far removed from contemporary life of

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<sup>4</sup> *Chao* means "to fix" in the context.

Asian immigrants as time goes by. Due to a geographical change that is intrinsic to immigration, components of modernism are reified in the inter-space between Asia and America—

Chinatown—in Han Ong’s wickedly wrought delineation:

So many things emphasized a sense of being at a remove, of being in America and not in America at the same time, that I would have sworn I was dreaming and that this was the same place visited every night—not-Manila and not-New York, not-past and not-present. Stuck in limbo. Between departure and arrival. A place like the future, thought of and imagined in ways that barely touched the circumference of its incomprehensibility. (Ong 32)

Ong pictures Chinatown in a way that corresponds to Asian American ideology. But such a correspondence is only part of his work. An Asian American reading practice will interpret the *feng shui* trend described in the novel as a device that further mystifies the East and thereupon confirms the Orientalist assumption of the mysterious, inexplicable, and superstitious image of the East. However, a careful look at the mechanism of the *feng shui* practices in the book will discombobulate this conventional Asian American literary criticism because William’s *feng shui* clients are not distinctively racially profiled. To blur the racial boundaries, Ong even eliminates the last names of some of the supporting characters, which makes it impossible to tell their racial or ethnic differences.

Therefore, it is unexpectedly reputable to nail down *Fixer Chao* as Asian American literature due to the protagonist’s satire on the residual self-victimization of Asian Americans. Disguised as a *feng shui* savant, Master Chao, William appears at Suzy’s dinner party, where he meets Paul Chan Chuang Toledo Lin, a novelist renowned for his book, *Peking Man? Woman?* This hocus opus of Lin’s stereotypically divides the world into the East and West and accuses the

West of feminizing the East. William despises Lin for the reason that in contrast to William's action of revenge, Lin represents the upper-middle class of Asian America, chanting for a voice, a representation, with words but without actions, that turns into "a screed, a rant, a complaint, huffing and puffing" (Ong 109). Lin's book, according to *Master Chao*, is "nothing more than a thicket of expensive words forming a wall, not a window" (110). The hypocrisy of Lin is embodied in his moans for a motherland and proclaims to maintain authentic Asianness while he is happily living a luxury life in America and enjoying his fame as an American writer. William constantly sneers at Lin and even laughs at his "ridiculously long name" because it "was like a locomotive assembled to chug backward toward some kind of fake history of purity" (110). This satire upsets and disconcerts the politics of Asian Americanism, which identifies Asian America as a product of the U.S. national project of racialization and underscores the tension between the unification and homogeneity of American cultural and legal narratives about the immigration-formed Asian America and the heterogeneous formations of these racialized subjects who share a legacy of immigration that is not induced by autonomy but determined by these American narratives. The satire disrupts the motive of Asian American literature that reflects and stresses the collective experiences of Asian Americans as racialized subjects. It also indicates the discrepancy within the same race and thus recognizes the dissemblance of pan-ethnic Asian America.

Ong's criticism of Asian American politics does not agitate Asian American critics. In fact, they display more indifference than severe criticism towards this novel. Hsuan Hsu explains that little critical attention<sup>5</sup> has been intended for *Fixer Chao*

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<sup>5</sup> Once I ordered this book for my class, the Textbook Manager of the University Bookstore in Seattle informed me that *Fixer Chao* was currently out of print as of March 11, 2011.

perhaps because its excessively cynical protagonist rejects and even mocks the intellectual “screeds” of Asian American studies, or else because the novel’s attitudes towards issues of cultural assimilation and immigrant subjectivity are unusually difficult to sort out ([Ong] 109). Many of the novel’s critics seem happy to stop at its dazzling cynicism—a satirical wit that is highly readable but that makes no direct interventions in the spheres of culture and politics. (676)

Even though it may not be her intention, Hsu’s cognizance of the academic insouciance to this novel showcases that the Asian American reading practice that used to be restrained within the paradigms of Asian American cultural politics now confronts a challenge in the post-modern Asian America. In the twenty-first century, the imaginary community of Asian America features more than any other time a heterogeneity that is engendered by class distinction rather than a singular application of race. To be more accurate, the class stratification alongside the emergence and expansion of model minorities has been amplified. It can no longer stay quietly outside of a global economic phenomenon or remain safe on its national territory. The very presence of such complexities triggered by the paradoxical relationships between class and race has become more obtrusive, phenomenal, and decisive. This is the social reality of Asian American modernity.

The manner in which this modern phenomenon posits itself in literature, however, is oblique and confusing since it swings between “ancient” and modern forms, which I etymologize as “contradiction.” Asian American writers do not openly assert their commitment to modernity. The formalist logic that once dominated the Western literature and literary studies after all the foregoing criticism against it has lost its charm and thus has been abandoned in its entirety. This is the environment in which Asian American literature is maturing. Or shall we say, Asian American literature has missed the most crucial moment of the Western literary criticism on this

front? The sociological and historical causes need not be repeated. As a consequence, Asian American literature is developed in the post-formalist atmosphere and freed from any formalist constraint. Content as opposed to the detached, “pure” form is more emphasized than ever due to the boost of literary criticism drawn from philosophy, sociology, psychology, and historiography, etc.

Modernity directs the writer’s utterance away from their avowed purpose and leaves what the writer means to say disguised behind the rhetoric device of language. While the writer has all the right to remain obscure in modern forms of confusion, interpreters of such texts feel the need to be realistic and to make obvious meanings out of the fuliginous texts. It becomes even more complicated for Asian American writers and critics. The responsibility for social justice and moral integrity is unprecedentedly such a *sine qua non* for Asian American writers that they are simultaneously the historians and the novelists, and their writing is both an act of creation and an interpretive and justifying process of such creation. This process distinguishes literary writing from precise, scientific, and evidentiary historical writing. When literary writing is oriented by an inner, private voice that follows an incoherent act and results in inconsistent politics, it is haunted by modernity and thus becomes more modernist than realist.

Han Ong is tempted by such maneuvers. The monologues that prevail in the novel lay no consistent ideological ground for Asian American criticism, which makes it impossible to conduct any classical reading by remaining loyal to Asian American nationalism. Now can we draw a final line over the form of this novel? It appears quite modernist. Not so fast. Asian American realism was not given the chance to join American realism in its golden time. When American realism took over the American literary history back in the late nineteenth century, Asian Americans were still looking for a literary form of self-representation. The tardiness of

literary representations of Asian America is coherent with Asian America's involvement in American history. For Asian Americans, American history started with industrialization that had turned America into a New World in both geographical and historical senses: it was new to Asian migrants, the European immigrants, and recently liberated slaves. Industrialized America, which "was the product of technological success without the ideals that would have made it into a utopia" (Lehan 59), coupled with racialized America conditioned Asian American literature and determined Asian American literature to be socially, historically, and culturally functional, responsible and representational. In other words, the mission of Asian American literature entails a realist engagement and deprives itself of a modernist intimacy: the collective victimization and racialization of Asian Americans has made all personal voices in the novel public, similar, and representable.

However, *Fixer Chao* promotes an individual figure and has been rejected by Asian American critics through their silence for the reason mentioned by Hsu. The other reason that can explain the academic apathy is more generic: Richard Lehan describes well that "[o]nce the novel began concentrating on the pursuits of the individual, its depiction of the community changed as well" (*Realism and Naturalism* 34). The very first pages of *Fixer Chao* explicitly alert the reader that Ong does not intend for his characters to be representable, at least racially. William certainly does not represent Filipino Americans; neither does Suzy Yamada or Kendo represent Japanese Americans. William's acquaintance with Suzy is made possible through his disguise as the *feng shui* master; even though they are both immigrants, there is nothing in common between them but race, which does not promise a sense of belonging or sympathy. The handsome, elegant and stately Suzy Yamada is first introduced to William by Shem C. through a modern home design magazine, which records her extravagant life in the wealthy Upper West

Side in Manhattan with her beautiful half-Chinese son, Kendo. Suzy perfectly stands for the model minority story: sent by her widowed, hard-working mother to school in Canada and decided to stay in America by herself due to the freedoms for a woman that can only be achieved in the West. Being married to a Chinese American man, a romantic believer in love who fears everything that is bourgeois, Suzy decides to divorce him because she is not “about to stop *succeeding* just for him” (Ong 183; emphasis original). Suzy’s own life experience is consistent with every model minority, struggling and prospering owing to her clairvoyance and perseverance. In others’ eyes, “[w]ith Suzy everything’s a loan” and “everything’s simple” (141). She has no need for a complex motivation because the simple idea to move upward is enough to impel her. Like her name, Isuzu/Suzy Yamada, the namesake actress who plays Lady Macbeth in an Akira Kurosawa movie, *Throne of Blood*, she does not strive to honor her family or her race; she is simply power-thirsty.

Kendo, Suzy’s son, a half-Chinese and half-Japanese American, assembles his lower-class Chinese American father and detests his economically and socially successful mother. Having a thing in smelling a rat, Kendo stalks William, finds out his identity, threatens him with a purpose of befriending him. Admiring William for his remarkably strategic fraud, Kendo wants to be bad, which has become his “mantra” (Ong 227), with the desire to break free from her mother’s tyrannical control and as it reveals, free from a good citizenship automatically endowed to Asian Americans. Sent to an elite school by his mother, Kendo used to be surrounded by “boys who talked like perfect juniors of their cigar-chomping fathers. Out of their mouths came foreign and vaguely threatening words like futures, debentures, arbitrages, bonds” (226). They are boys “to whom the future belonged, who would, in the time it would take to pick up a phone and punch a button, reorganize the world, move things around,” and whose motifs “involved

forward movement” (226), just like Suzy Yamada. Kendo comes to execrate the hypocritical values of his culturally white, upper-class upbringing and never hides his repugnance at the rich white boys, who sees him “without question as being one of them” because *Asian* is a uniform of elitism and “a stamp on the forehead that read: Most likely Not to Trouble the Waters” (226). As a rebellion, Kendo admires blacks, who “were lucky in that they had that revolt, that rebuke built into the way they looked, the way they spoke” (226). For this reason, Kendo enjoys visiting his father, stepmother, and step-sister, who live in an apartment building full of “more sophisticated operators,” who “[t]o supplement their unemployment or Social Security checks...engaged in Welfare or food stamps scams, insurance fraud, faking Workers’ Comp claims, being false parties at will contestations” (229). For the same reason, Kendo is attracted by William as the latter belongs to the former’s criminal friends but with elaborate plans of moving up and “flushed with pride” (231). Eventually, Kendo pays for his rejection of the racial pride, and is scapegoated for William and killed by Neil, whom Suzy hires to end William’s life after discovering William’s scam.

Refusing to be representational, Ong experiments new literary devices in his writing, such as his presentation of the physical beauty of Suzy and Kendo. There are few characters in Asian American literature that possess beauty because the suffering and struggling of Asian Americans demote the beauty of its subjects. Beauty is rarely repeated and emphasized as a motif in Asian American literature. Unlike the Western literary tradition developed from Greek and Roman literatures, where the beauty of Helen in *Iliad* “prefigures the beauty of all future narratives as entities that point to their own fictional nature” (de Man 17), Asian American literature is originated in a tradition that is deprived of a pursuit of beauty by the century-long racialization. The beauty motif appears when it is no longer an impossible mission for the writers

to address it. But the meaning of beauty has not changed; it is still tightly attached to the bourgeois culture shared and chased by William's *feng shui* clients. The beauty motif further signifies the new phenomenon where the class differences are augmented within Asian America, which are purposefully stressed by Ong in his comparable portrayal of Preciosa, William's country fellow and only true friend.

While Suzy and Kendo represent a model minority myth and its rejection, Preciosa is a stereotypical victim of the hallucination of American dreams. Having been living in New York for twenty years, Preciosa witnesses New York's "seedy heyday" (Ong 15). Though her arrival in America precedes William by years, she is nowhere near well-being or success. Even when there is a moment for her to realize her dream of becoming an actress, she comes to play a naked barbarian, with "droopy and small" (42) breasts exposed to the audience in a stage play, *Primitives*. Preciosa, as later revealed, migrates to this land of opportunity as a mail bride from the Philippines. Her marriage to a Texan veteran, who is by no means a frog prince, has bought her the U.S. citizenship, which is so precious that even makes the disgusting sex bearable because "it was still sex in Texas, U.S.A" (311). Her own vision of the Filipino women in America is nothing unheard-of: they are "frumpy nannies, matronly aides pushing wheelchair-bound wards on the streets, and nurses with the faces of servile dogs—people she felt personally ashamed for" (312). Although she opines such a fate in America as "worse than death" (312) and she can do no better, she is unwilling to return home because returning is "an admission of defeat" (308). At some point, she is a weak and self-contradictory nationalist who is proud of having not been back ever since she moves to America because for her and William, "everything from the past was burnt free, and to return would only be to satisfy a masochistic desire to be yanked back down to the level of a world [they'd] both been lifted from. Rescued. This, in essence, being the

definition of immigration” (160). However, immigration is neither a settlement for them. When William’s scam is discovered, Preciosa flees the U.S. for the Philippines to escape the persecution, leaving her empty apartment a sense of void and dereliction:

[E]ven while Preciosa had lived there, it had already had an air of vacancy, of transiency about it, an air that...was a transfer from its owner, who...had already had the look of someone who would make of her present address a somewhere else, another in a long line of somewhere elses [sic] like the country she’d just vacated to get here, on and on as if carrying out the directive of some deficiency encoded into her genes, a hunger, some basic discontent. This, being one more definition of immigration—torn between the competing pulls of the fiction of the promised land, on the one hand, and the fiction of the sustaining mother country, on the other. (325-326)

Ty contextualizes the emptiness of Preciosa’s apartment and affirms the transiency, dislocation, a state of in-betweenness and non-belonging that happens to the transnational sphere for Filipino Americans like Preciosa. The minute depiction of the apartment keeps the narrative from transcending the racial boundaries and once more resembles Asian American narrative that is reflected in Carlos Bulosan’s *American Is in the Heart* by interrogating the logical ground of Filipinos’ sojourns in America, and enables an arbitrary reading of the text within Asian American ideological confinement that seems to be challenged by the rest of the novel. But the presentation of the historicity of William’s narration is disparate from early Asian American narrations adopted by writers like Bulosan and Frank Chin. Ong comes across a presumption of confidence in the reader’s knowledge of Asian American historical context; instead of directing the reader towards the “recovery of Asian American literary writings that had been lost, ignored,

or misclassified, or had gone out of print” (Ling 101), Ong employs a horizontal perspective without reminding the reader of the suffering experienced by Asian Americans in history. The authorial abandonment of Asian American ideological narrative mode, however, is congruous with Asian American literary history because such productive activity reflects its historical development and the direction of such development of Asian American literature.

The portrayals of different facets of Asian American lives prove that race is still a concern for Han Ong. In fact, race is a residue in Asian American literary history. Even in novels like *Fixer Chao*, which becomes as thorny as William’s identity, the procedural critique of race in Asian American literature is so overwhelming that the first thing critics attempt to perceive is the authorial delineations and examen of Asian American racialization and victimization. This assumption certainly has its social base and specific historicity of long-lasting racism with pernicious influence on Asian American individuals and communities as well as on American society as a whole. After all, as Franco Moretti asserts, “[l]iterary texts are *historical* products organized according to *rhetorical* criteria” (9; emphasis original); this concept of literary historiography is in particular applicable to Asian American literature. However, Han Ong imbues his book with three dimensions of cultural politics: race, class, and sexuality, with the intention of dodging one’s supersedure over another. The dimension of one category does not necessarily echo the others: the racially oppressed is not necessarily subdued in the sexual or caste terms and vice versa. Ong still carries generically racialized characters in his book, such as Preciosa and even William. The racial genericness, however, turns out non-generic in this novel though it still remains effective in Asian Americanism. The presence of such characters coincides with the main Asian American ideology and renders *Fixer Chao* a realist purpose that

jibes with the request of Asian American criticism. Ong is experimental and exploratory; he knows it is safe to stay in realism, but he refuses to grant it wholeness.

As a necessary form of Asian American literary and cultural productions, realism has not coincided with Asian American literature simultaneously. With the historicity as a racialized social product consumed by the U.S. capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy, Asian American literature did not have the indulgent moment of romanticism and its theoretical moment has been deferred. For the political purpose of historical visibility and social justice, Asian American literature undoubtedly renders realism its essential form for its featuring verisimilitude and mimesis. But when realistic virtuosités are considered operative for Asian American representations in its literature, there is an inclination to overlook another essential of realism, that is, realism is not only a mere formal matter but also a political and ideological one. This overlooking act distinguishes Bertolt Brecht from Georg Lukács. For the former, realism means

discovering the causal complexes of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power/writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up/emphasising [*sic*] the element of development/making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it. (Brecht 82; Leslie 127)

Realism engages itself in a matter of power for being used by the bourgeoisie and the subjects of capitalist society to visualize their “objective and wide overview of reality” (Leslie 126-127) and to seize the power from the aristocracy. Through realism, the bourgeoisie made an announcement that the world is not all pleasant or subjective: subjectivity of society can be objectified and the subjects of society can change the world inside and outside the literary text

because the world is recognizable. Radical and socialist realisms especially in proletarian literature, though with different projects and goals, confine the textual reality to a classified world of capitalism. Lukács does not differ from Brecht at this point. But Lukács's belief in realism can only be proved valid with three premises: firstly, the totality of capitalism is unchallenged and unaltered; secondly, the subjective psychologism of human conditions is dysfunctional and thus should be disregarded; thirdly, the world has no significant racial differences. If Lukács's premises are verified, then realism will be sufficient and effective for all literary re/presentations in different historical periods.

Asian American literature, due to the historicity of Asian America, deals with American society of different colors. Although the adoption of realism by Asian American writers is not synonymous with American realism, the residue of realism cannot be erased and thus Asian American realism has affinities with American realism—both conceive a common awareness of the American bourgeois society. Though Asian America is a racial invention in lieu of a classified one, it should be noticed and stressed that a severe Asian American class stratification from within was once made impossible because of the institutional and legitimate project of racialization. Thus a delineation of the class conflicts among ethnic Asian Americans was barely made conceptual. However, history is changing as we all believe. The emergence and growth of the model minorities has revamped the class strata of Asian America from a primarily unified, homogeneous social stratum to multi-layered social class, followed by changes in the ethnographical paradigms of Asian American studies and the productive forms of Asian American literature. Realism still dominates Asian American literature for its capability of representing the totality and collectivity of Asian American experiences; but the appearance of new classes or social strata demands a different Asian American literary form than realism. The

alienation, fragmentation, subjectivity, individuality are experiences not only monopolized by white Americans but also obtained by minorities. When the global market economy is not played by the U.S. single-handedly, the human subjectivity is enhanced rather than diminished by this collective economic practice. A rejection of humanism is global while a demand for it is international too.

The new phenomenon of contradiction fiction is its engagement with alternative paradigms of Asian America. Though deracination of Asian American literature is still questionable and refutable, the suspicion of its possibility has nonetheless testifies its emergence. It is probably also the reason why *Fixer Chao* is overlooked: a slight sense of deracination has upset its sponsors of Asian Americanism. It negates the enduring work of Asian Americanists, exemplified by William's disgust of Toledo Lin's book and spares no effort to demarcate the New York Asian American community into opposing classes. Asian American personas become less representational and more idiosyncratic; the latter characteristic enables subjective, distorted, and abstract modernist virtuosities.

But, still, on the verge of attaching modernism to *Fixer Chao*, the author proposes a focus on objects. Han Ong spends time observing and depicting objects and objectified individuals. William cannot keep his eyes off nine-hundred-dollar cashmere throws, an over-priced luxury expense that symbolizes the upper-middle class taste. Having been on both sides of the thrower<sup>6</sup>, having been poor, rich and then poor again, William is transformed from a catcher of money (Ong 61) to a thrower. By using the metaphor of "catcher," Ong alludes to *The Cather in the Rye*. But rather than a catcher of innocence and youth like Holden Caulfield, William has nothing other than money to catch. His alienation is not a phase, but a lifetime. This Asian American persona is expelled not only by the white America, but also by the colored world. Realism of the

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<sup>6</sup> William buys a seven-hundred-dollar cashmere blanket once he succeeds as Master Chao. So does Preciosa.

novel counterpoises itself to modernism in the sense of pursuing an impossible ideal of self-fulfillment.

This is what essentially disturbs Asian Americanist readers—its obscurity of form, not between autobiography and fiction, but between realism and modernism. The moment in literary history when Asian American literary works were criticized for not being faithful to the reality, or when Asian American historians or sociologists read Asian American novels as documentations, has long gone. Books like *Fixer Chao* are usually followed by a subtitle, “A Novel,” to explicitly differentiate Asian American reality from fictionality. But the criticism of Asian American literature remains intact; it does not advance alongside the mainstream literary criticism or Asian American literary proliferation because any advancement will put literary criticism in danger of distraction away from Asian Americanism. The unity of Asian American realism is disrupted by temporal modernism. The collectivity and totality of Asian Americanism is interrupted by writers’ intimate communication within a private space, as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* does, because the intimacy allows the personal voice not to speak for a public, historical record. The author of *Fixer Chao* in his realistic display of the classified Asian Americans cannot stray away from a personal desire for such intimacy. As a consequence, the nuanced exchanges between realism and modernism are brought up here and there in his writing. The scenario of Preciosa’s empty apartment, for example, is not confined to Asian American experience. Though the transiency of her apartment is perhaps “one more definition of immigration” (Ong 325), it is one more definition of poverty as well. William—even Han Ong himself—forgets to explain why the emptiness definition of immigration does not apply to immigrants like Suzy Yamada, or he simply rejects an immediate, exclusive connection between racial minority and class inferiority. The inconsistent ideology in this novel betrays the

author's knowledge as a contemporary Asian American writer, who is defined so and thus tries to behave so, even though the automatic narrativity of fiction leads him the other way.

Nevertheless, Ong's unchanging focus on the classified Asian America and mainstream America corresponds with realism, which "is always a class-bound understanding of actuality and the transmission of this actuality" (Bown 119; Taylor 150). The moment of modernist insertion slips into his writing with the intention of writing about human lives, not just Asian Americans. Master Chao's true identity as William Paulinha is eventually resumed in his repetition at the close of his self-narration that "*this is my life*" (Ong 371-372; italics original), which signifies an assertion of individuality, differentiation, and possession, and refusal to representability. As alienation is not unique to Asian Americans, neither is invisibility, which is resumed by William when he eventually runs away and settles down in Southern California. For now, invisibility has brought him peace and security and become a "strange and beautiful blessing" so that his "life remained an uninflected one of stalking around unbothered. He "walked around unseen, as if invisible" (377), outside of the fast-paced city of Los Angeles in Southern California, where he lives like a "ghost[s] with histories receding daily" (374). Eventually, through William's resumption of his old invisible, alienated, marginalized, and fragmented self, Ong indicates the powerless and marginalization of the modern human beings and implies that the whole point of this book is not about *feng shui*, or the "chaoing" activity of Master Chao, or even Asian Americans. What Asian American critics may have overlooked is William's sarcasm on the meaning of being—a distinctive crisis of modernity. By swinging between realism and modernism with no definite propensity towards either, *Fixer Chao* has not quite accomplished the mission of a literary revolution in the Asian American literary history;

but when William confesses that “[i]t was only a matter of time before I began not looking Chinese, or even Filipino” (374), it is on its way there.

#### VI. *New Form of Asian America: Cosmopolitanism and Modernism in The Namesake*

Considering herself “a product of three countries” (Nityanandam 12), Jhumpa Lahiri is a cosmopolitan and metropolitan; so are most of her fictional characters. Born in London to Bengali immigrant parents, Lahiri moved to the United States when she was three years old and grew up in Rhode Island. Her “transitional beings” (Turner 95; Nityanandam 13) affirm her unenclosed cultural belongings, as expressed by Lahiri at a press conference in Calcutta: “No country is my motherland. I always find myself in exile whichever country I travel to, that is why I was tempted to write something about those living their lives in exile” (Nityanandam 13). The self-claimed hybridity and diaspority of her identity enables her self-identification as “an American author, an Indian-American author, a British-born author, an Anglo-Indian author, an NRI (non-resident Indian), an ABCD (American-born confused desi), and a lost and found author” (Kuortti 205). Lahiri’s works are mainly studied in the paradigms of postcolonialism and Asian American studies due to her diasporic identity and the postcolonial situation of India. Despite mongrel interpretations of her works, critics of Lahiri have reached a consent that her first novel, *The Namesake*, which revolves around identity and self-identification, is a modern and metropolitan act and an unclosed response to the predicaments of modernity. With cosmopolitan elements, *The Namesake* controversially combines realism and modernism.

*The Namesake*, when published in 2003, became one of the best sellers in *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Newsday*, and *San Jose Mercury News*. Prior to this novel, Lahiri has gained fame from her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which

won her a Pulitzer Prize in literature. Like most contemporary Asian American novels, *The Namesake* has not aroused much interest in most literature departments. Natalie Friedman reports that there were sixteen entries on Lahiri by 2008 in the *MLA International Bibliography*, most of which target *Interpreter of Maladies*. As of 2010, it increased to thirty entries on the author. However, we must not forget that Asian American studies is still on its way to be hypostatized in American academia. The breach between the U.S. English or literature departments and the Asian American studies programs is epitomized in their acceptance of Lahiri and her works. South Asianists and Asian Americanists in the field of South Asian migrants are intrigued by Lahiri. Conference panels on Lahiri are not uncommon. The trend of Lahiri study is welcomed, though not uncritically.

The study on *The Namesake* majorly generalizes it as an ethnic bildungsroman and focuses on its immigrant motif of self-identification. The categorization as such features a conflation of Asian American literary forms, a hasty generalization of ethnic literary themes, an ignorance of the historicity of Asian American literary transformation, a depletion of Asian American modern phenomenon, and a subconscious act of stabilizing the Asian American subject in the single paradigm of assimilation and Asian American nationalism. *The Namesake*, credited by some readers for its old-fashion and purely literary ambition and traced to “the roots of nineteenth-century realism, of Balzac and Dickens” (Lynn 161), *secretively* celebrates its modernist display of Asian America that cannot be fully grappled with by a group of modernist literary critics partially due to their incomprehensive knowledge of Asian America’s social and historical backdrop that contextualize its literary history. Recent work on Lahiri and *The Namesake* acknowledges that the novel does not only chronicle the immigrants’ experience by connecting varying moments of the ranging life periods of Ashima and Ashoke but also

transcends such experience with a significant exploration of Gogol's identity through a captivating description of his internal conflicts and continuous struggles to appease clashing spectra of his identity without truly accepting it collectively. Even though its position in Asian American literature has been criticized and updated by Natalie Friedman from an immigrant novel to a travel narrative, it is still primarily recognized for its inscription of an immigration theme.

Similar to the survival fiction, *The Namesake* is also concluded with a disclosure; but what differentiates it from the early immigrant fiction is that this salient feature makes all the way through to the end. Whereas the survival fiction writers are unable to find a real solution in the end for the characters because of the institutional limitations and restrictions, Lahiri is unwilling to offer a solution and believes in the characters' autonomy. The disclosure is especially exemplified by Gogol Ganguli, the eponymous protagonist, in his conscious pursuit and creation of his identity that for once is discontinued and severed from his past. This identity creation and claim experience three phases and end with a non-conclusion, or even, a beginning that denies a singular definition. These three phases can be psychologically framed as the Marginal Man, the Traditionalist, and the Asian-American, a generalizing theory of the Chinese American personality by Stanley and Derald Sues. According to the Sues, the Traditionalist usually has a strong sense of Asian values and associates the self with academic and occupational success. He is burdened with the family responsibility of being a good son (38). The Marginal Man is the opposite: he faces up to identity crisis and defines the self in terms of Caucasians' acceptance (40). The Asian-American is rather harder to define. Though sharing the common patterns with the other two types, the Asian-American attempts to find the meaning of self-identity and possesses a more progressive political and social awareness (42). The Asian-

American places emphasis on raising ethnic or racial pride and esteem (42) through questioning the social responsibility for racism. In some sense, the Asian-American is an assertive activist.

At first sight, Gogol falls precisely into such categorizations during the process of his self-identification. While the application of the Asian-American is still in doubt and remains unsettled, the other two categories happen to wonderfully coincide with Lahiri's depiction of the second-generation immigrants, or the children of immigrants. Gogol's transition from the Marginal Man to the Traditionalist is showcased in his relationships with Maxine and Moushumi. Romance to Gogol is what the overcoat is to Akaky Akakyevitch in Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat." In her stunning interpretation of the author's integration of "The Overcoat" in *The Namesake*, Judith Caesar proposes that as the overcoat brings a material solidarity and reliability to Akaky, whose "very lack of identity is the source of his happiness" (104), Gogol's romantic relationships become a series of identities he imposes upon himself. Through Maxine and Moushumi, Gogol does not discover what he is but what he is not. Such a metaphor can be hardly denied by Gogol as well as the author herself<sup>7</sup>.

What appeals to Gogol about Maxine is her rich WASP family and befitting carefree style. In their relationship, Maxine plays the role of a predator: she takes a preemptive action, initiates their relationship, and consequently pulls Gogol into the mainstream WASP life. What Gogol does is simply comply with it. Maxine's family—the Ratliffs—symbolizes the traditional value of Euro-America: for one thing, they are generous but "do not go out of their way to accommodate others" (Lahiri, *NS* 136); for another, the parent-child relationship is fancily open, trusting, and understanding. They share everything and hide nothing within the family. Unlike

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<sup>7</sup> The film of *The Namesake* directed by Mira Nair indicates a different interpretation that challenges this metaphor. At the end of the film, when Gogol finds out Moushumi's love affair with Pierre—as Dimitri in the novel, he asserts that he marries Moushumi not because of her ethnicity and he loves her for what she is. In the novel, however, there is no assertion as such.

Gogol who never talks to his parents about his personal feelings, the Ratliffs expose their feelings to one another unscrupulously. Gogol is so absorbed by the Ratliffs' manner of living that he naturalizes the fact that to love Maxine is "to know and love all these things" (137) that surround and define her. Without a doubt,

[h]e learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to expect the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwasher, as he had mistakenly done one evening when he was helping to clean up....He learns to anticipate, every evening, the sound of a cork emerging from a fresh bottle of wine. (137)

If there is some defect in their relationship, it is the little envy he has for her "gift of accepting her life" (138) by impeccably enjoying being herself without wishing to be anyone else. In the meantime, recalling his own parents, their expectations of him, as well as their "utterly private, uncelebrated" love (138)—if any, Gogol decides that the inferior, suppressed, emotionless lifestyle of theirs is his very reason to escape, in order to be a Marginal man fabricating an un-Asian life for himself. In such a relationship that frees him from any promise of being a traditional Bengali son, Gogol feels ashamed of his family and his tiny shabby apartment, which, upon his moving in with Maxine, becomes an empty entity that has never fulfilled the mission of being a home to him. In the name of his pursuit of independence, individuality, personal space, and "the merits of his spartan" (139), it is this apartment that he defends against his mother's repugnance at the condition. It is the same apartment that makes him "quietly thrilled" (139) at Maxine's similar expression of repulsion.

Gogol's approach to Maxine and involvement with her family simultaneously but unnecessarily takes him away from Ashima and Ashoke, who as parents remind him of his old identity as Gogol constantly. He is aware of this lifestyle with Maxine as "dependence, not adulthood" (Lahiri, *NS* 142). But he happily embraces such dependence as a gesture of rejection of the identity levied upon him by his parents and meanwhile a registration of loading the void left by his rejection with the Otherness that does not belong to him, though he is unable to decide what the Otherness refers to. When Maxine's parents leave for the summer house in New Hampshire, Gogol feels "responsible for nothing in the house; in spite of their absence, Gerald and Lydia continue to lord, however blindly, over their days. It is their books he reads, their music he listens to. Their front door he unlocks when he gets back from work. Their telephone messages he takes down" (142). He behaves like an adopted son, willingly and eagerly assimilating to a life that negates his Bangali heritage.

Gogol's involvement with the Ratliffs is the perceptible symptom of a change that takes place in Gogol's mind and affirms his vision of the split between Asianness and Americanness. More than being mutually exclusive, Asianness—represented by Ashima and Ashoke—in totality surrenders to Americanness that is continued, advanced and exaggerated by its European definition. When he "goes shopping with [Maxine] on Madison Avenue at stores they must be buzzed into, for cashmere cardigans and outrageously expensive English colognes that Maxine buys without deliberation or guilt" or dines out at "darkened, humble-looking restaurants downtown where the tables are tiny, the bills huge" (Lahiri, *NS* 142), Gogol is perhaps fully aware of the symbolic social meanings of such consuming behaviors: they are associated with the limited gold-collar workforce and the maintenance of metropolitan communities. If his first girlfriend Ruth leads him to the threshold of a public, non-filial, and simply colorless space,

Maxine immerses him in a metropolitan culture that is developed upon elite consumption and luxury as well as ironically and historically related to xenophobia filtered through its racialized discourses. As an exilic writer as Lahiri claims, nationalism no longer exists as the tangible prime concern in her writing. Instead, transnationalism that defines a metropolitan space as New York transcends every paradigm of the nationalist discourses. When the locale of the novel moves from the simplistic suburbia of Cambridge, Massachusetts, to the sophisticated core city of global finance and politics, Lahiri in her encyclopedic descriptions of such an urban life locates the novel from the ethnic enclave that is always thematized by early Asian American writers to a broader stage of the larger society of America and betrays her subconscious self-identification as a cosmopolitan.

Cosmopolitanism in the novel is further reified in the character of Moushumi. Unlike Maxine, Moushumi is never satisfied with her identity. She continuously seeks out and creates a new identity that is neither entirely American nor wholly Indian. Her cosmopolitan experience in Europe infuses a third, Parisian quality into this new self of hers. But Gogol is somewhat blind to this quality of Moushumi's simply because of their shared ethnicity. The Bengali heritage participated by Gogol and Moushumi automatically clears all the obstacles which used to stand between Gogol and Maxine so that there is little to explain about what they know and how they know about each other, that he can imagine her life with ease, and picture "the large suburban house her family owned; the china cabinet in the dining room, her mother's prized possession; the large public high school in which she had excelled but that she had miserably attended" (Lahiri, *NS* 211-212). The image of Moushumi as a traditional Bengali girl is so engraved in Gogol's mind that when he calls out Moushumi at Ashima's insistence, he is quite shocked at

Moushumi's changes after years in Paris and undeniably attracted to her fluent French and her Parisian posture.

Deploring "a fixed certainty in her life" (Lahiri, *NS* 213) and repenting a daunting symbol of a decided future, Moushumi finds a French self as an alternative to her American and Bengali ones. French is her refuge: it never claims her because this third locus of her self-identification never demands loyalty, requests responsibility, and most of all, defines her. Paris, where Moushumi "both fits in perfectly yet remains slightly novel" and has "reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt" (233), transforms her with perfume and jewelry, promiscuity and sexuality until she becomes "the kind of girl she had once envied, had believed she would never become" (215). The self-reinvention empowers her and creates a new identity according to her personality, experience, and aspirations rather than her cultural or national attributions (Kral 71), which Gogol understands, goes through, witnesses, and sympathizes as he undergoes this re-invention of the Self by changing his name to Nikhil. But Gogol never hunts for a third identity to fulfill his completeness. He is wonderfully comfortable with his Americanness and feels at ease with it. While Moushumi has a sense of nostalgia for London, Gogol spends most his lifetime in America and the only nostalgia of his is only connected to his parents. Moushumi complicates Gogol's version of self-identification since she is never satisfied with what she possesses, which partially results in Moushumi's phobia of a traditional Bengali marriage. Yet, Gogol simplifies this complication and mistakes Moushumi as his own reflection, the same misperception made by the waiter in an Italian restaurant they dine in one night (Lahiri, *NS* 203). Both the waiter and Gogol are deceived by the mirror images of Gogol and Moushumi, who share the same experience by "seeking identity from material things and from sequential and temporary relationships, just as Gogol's Akaky had done with his overcoat" (Caesar 115).

The daedal cosmopolitan and metropolitan facets of Moushumi's identity creation eventually start to bother Gogol soon after the wedding. Moushumi's Frenchness does not only make Gogol feel confused in perceiving her as his wife but also castrate him by reminding him of his lack of the immigrant quality shared by Moushumi, Ashoke, and Ashima: exploring a separate life by moving to elsewhere is so foreign and unimaginable to him that he even envies and resents Moushumi a little for being able to do so. Moushumi forcefully brings the Francophone and bourgeois manners as the *dernier cri* into their lives, which makes Gogol feel contrite and hidden. His dwindling in Moushumi's narrative is magnified during their honeymoon in Paris, where he feels useless and powerless because "Moushumi makes all the decisions, does all the talking" and refuses to be *mistaken* as a tourist while Gogol solely wants to be "a tourist, fumbling with a phrase book, looking at all the buildings on his list, getting lost" (Lahiri, *NS* 231). Feeling constrained in a strange place and compelled to follow Moushumi's lead, Gogol is concretely defined by her rejection of the Americanness that would confine and reduce her to a tourist. But it is not all the Americanness that Moushumi disallows; it is only the certain Bengali spectrum of her Americanness that she attempts to abandon. The bourgeois and cosmopolitan atmosphere of Paris alleviates the imagined boundaries between Bengaliness and Americanness and imbues the original racial differences with the oneness that cannot be truly differentiated in an alternative world.

In her creation of her Americanness, Moushumi's intimate relationship with Donald and Astrid helps to fantasize the mirage of living a European life in America. Lahiri's satire on her characters like Moushumi through her yuppie WASP friends is quite obvious. Donald and Astrid represent the lifestyle and domain of identity Moushumi desires: upper middle-class Caucasian. She turns to them for quotidian things including food, clothing, furnishing, decorations. They

avoid being practical because *practicality* is the antonym of uniqueness, privacy, and specialty. They offer Moushumi their brand of life as a gesture of approving her membership of this “intelligent, attractive, well-dressed crowd” (Lahiri, *NS* 236), of whom the association with dancing, drugs, and cocktails suggests youth and, mostly important, white Americanness, which shoots down the good Asian Americanness as dullness and diligence. The lacuna of this new identity of Moushumi defined by her friends is censored sarcastically by Lahiri in the scenario when Moushumi and Gogol celebrate their first wedding anniversary at an overpriced restaurant recommended by Donald and Astrid. The elusive location, mediocre taste, diminutive portions, and chilly air of the restaurant altogether disappoint Moushumi and Gogol. It is the first and only time Moushumi expresses a negative sentiment about her lavish lifestyle and a nagging doubt of her creative identity, though in an evasive way.

Does Lahiri mean to criticize or disapprove of her characters, in particular when Moushumi betrays Gogol with Dimitri? The equivocality of Lahiri’s narration blurs the answer. Lahiri does not spend too much effort in describing the details of the moment of truth because what matters is not the fact of Moushumi’s extramarital affair but the reason for her infidelity. Judith Caesar asserts that “it is the name”—Dimitri—“or the part of herself symbolized by that name” (117) that Moushumi is truly in love with. What upsets Gogol is the name of Moushumi’s lover as well: it makes him sickened and bewildered in the same way as “the night he had sat in the car with his father and learned the reason for his name” (Lahiri, *NS* 282), only without tenderness. Moushumi divorces Gogol and leaves for Paris with nothing from the brief life they have owned together. Nonetheless, this action of severing their conjoint past does not signal an indication that Gogol sunders his own identity; rather, the dis severance between Gogol and Moushumi implies the possibility of Gogol’s inner self-unification. But Lahiri has a delicate,

reluctant manner of delivering anything that concludes the novel or the characters and her ambiguity runs through the novel till the end. The reader is never assured what Gogol learns from his namesake's "The Overcoat"; neither is the ultimate search for his own identity or his accomplishment of constructing his different selves confirmed. Interpretations and explanations are never authorized, neither when Gogol is informed of the origin of his name nor when he recalls his moment with his father at the Cape Cod, where they make a journey "to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (187). In the Cape Cod scenario, Ashoke's expectation and Gogol's perception of life exploration are disjointed. The destination made by the first generation immigrants becomes the point of departure for their children. For Ashoke, immigration is a journey with a destination and life is a swing between two worlds. But such experience never occurs to Gogol. Though haunted by the memories like Ashoke haunted by something that is "irrational" and "inevitable about the world" (14), Gogol fails to understand what Ashoke sees through the migration experience. The *nowhere* in their journey becomes a void for Gogol, whose original real name is lost in transit, the one which remains an absence, "a signifier that, leaving the home country but never reaching its destination, remains unknown and unknowable" and the absence of which "comes to signify without the signifier being named" (Heinze, "A Diasporic Overcoat" 194).

Lahiri refuses to promise a closure for her story and leaves an opening for Gogol's identification. This non-promise is made through her objective style of narration. In actuality, it is this objectiveness that frees Lahiri from severe critique of her proclamation through the characters. However, it is also this style of narration that has confined her to a focus on objects instead of the internal torment. It is through this narration that Lahiri makes Gogol's grief with Ashoke's death transcend beyond words; that Lahiri exhibits the omnipresence of late capitalism

in the affects of post-1965 immigrants and their children; and that Lahiri swings between subjectivity and objectivity, realism and modernism. The chronic order of Lahiri's narration that presents accurate years at the beginning of several chapters, which links the flows of the storyline, makes it evidential that Lahiri inherits the tradition of Asian American literature and inclines towards real history and existence of Asian Americans. Her lavish portrayal of buildings, furniture, clothing, food, and essentially daily life trace demonstrates her narrative propensity for realism. But when it is necessary for her to engrave cosmopolitanism in her characters, Lahiri inevitably shifts to modernism because "the transformation of novel...has as its precondition not the novelist's will but the transformation of his society and his world" (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 178).

Natalie Friedman's essay on *The Namesake* comes to terms with cosmopolitizing the novel and the reading practice pertaining to it. By discharging *The Namesake* of the everyday-immigrant-novel designation, Friedman identifies it with the travel narrative. She maintains that the novel has transcended assimilation—the central theme of immigrant fiction—by placing the children of immigrants in the center of the story. Uninterested in "the pursuit of the American Dream as it was traditionally rendered in the older immigrant narratives," Friedman claims, Lahiri "is focusing on what happens once that dream (in its variety of incarnations) is achieved, not only by the generation of immigrants but also by its children" (112). This difference between *The Namesake* and immigrant fiction undeniably implies the specific historical progression and literary transformation of Asian America. By rejecting the centrality of assimilation, Lahiri, as recognized by Friedman as "a vanguard of young, contemporary ethnic American writer," dismantles "the stereotype of brown-skinned immigrant families that are always outsiders to American culture and recasts them as cosmopolites, members of a shifting network of global

travelers whose national loyalties are flexible” (112). Belonging to a world of cosmopolitans, the well-educated elite class of Indian immigrants and their children choose to valorize their global mobility and exempt the national limitations. Depicting America as an option rather than a stop or “a newly adopted homeland” (113), the novel dismisses a traditional disillusion sustained by immigrants upon landing on American soil and is devoted to an identity that is “limitless, without borders” (Lahiri, *NS* 26), as the name of “Ashima” suggests.

Acknowledging Friedman’s interpretation of the novel and its characters, however, I cannot help noticing the inner contradiction of her reading. While she recognizes and defines Gogol as a cosmopolitan, she also identifies him as “a happy tourist, one who is content to savor the privileges and pleasures of his native country” (122). Her perception of Gogol lucidly collides with Mike Featherstone’s clarification that cosmopolitans are not tourists: the former participate while the latter don’t (qtd. in Robbins 254). Tourists dwell on their homeland and the meaning of it: they are neither anti-localists nor anti-nationalists. They are not homeless.

Though “[a]bsolute homelessness is indeed a myth, and so is cosmopolitanism in its strictly negative sense of ‘free[dom] from national limitations or attachment’” (Robbins 250; Boas 152), cosmopolitans claim homelessness in order to become worldly because “worlding” is a process, “in which more than one ‘world’ may be realized” (Robbins 253). Cosmopolitans are sometimes paralleled to “fine-liver, aesthete, soft-handed trader in literary niceties”—“as ‘intellectual’ in the bad sense” (Brennan 21). They position themselves between borders and consider no country as their homeland. The luxury of their mobility evokes “the image of a privileged person: someone who can claim to be a ‘citizen of the world’ by virtue of independent means, expensive tastes, and a globe-trotting lifestyle” (Robbins 248). Kwame A. Appiah furnishes its definition with a self-claimed ideological independence that signals “a rejection of

the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities” (xiv). He confirms such rejection with positive racial concerns because cosmopolitans undertake the connections between varying human lives “not through identity but despite difference” (Appiah 135). Appiah’s provocation of cosmopolitanism confines the application of cosmopolitanism to a population that fundamentally has either of the following two ascriptive characteristics: born in the advantaged West or born as the colonized elite. The association of cosmopolitanism with privilege, which is better understood “as the normative edge that cosmopolitanism tries to add to the inclusiveness and diversity of multiculturalism” (Robbins 260), provokes an overlook of ethnocentrism and results in a celebration of Asian Americans’ material success that stimulates new foci of the contemporary Asian American literary theory, to which Western modernism can be applied.

Cosmopolitanism renders modernism possible. With their flexible national loyalties, the national body in the perceptions of cosmopolitans is “the shifting field within which the nation-state finds itself both dislocated and rearticulated” (Cheah 323). Since in this imagination of borderless identification “no single force is...able to assert itself as the final determinant that overarches the entire” social relationship, the writer empowers more freedom to her characters and thus become “persistently modulating” (Cheah 324) from realist determination to modernist generosity as well as submission to its doomed fragmentation without finding a coherent definition for the modern beings.

This interesting conflation of realist and modernist components inoculates equivocation and uncertainty into Lahiri’s narrative. The authorial intention of producing their works with certain theory in mind differentiates the contemporary writers from the early ones: the post-1965 Asian American writers are aware of the ongoing debate in academia over their literary

production. This consciousness imparts two messages: firstly, the social, ethnographical, historiographical, literary, and cultural studies theories have been embedded in the literary creation itself; secondly, the authors attempt to make their own arguments about the interpretation of their works during the writing process. This introspective activity is the modern phenomenon of Asian American fictions and literary theory.

The American literary world where Asian American writers made their debuts was ruled by the entrenched school of modernists while the Asian American literary world was populated by the politically sensitive assemblage of Asian American nationalists and realists. It is probably because “the writing of Asian American ‘novels’” is taken as “alternative ‘histories,’ suggesting that displacement, decolonization, and disidentification are crucial grounds for the emergence of Asian Americana critique” and realism with its tool of verisimilitude serves this sociopolitical purpose of Asian American literature—“a regime for the production of history” (Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* 104). Lisa Lowe refers *disidentification* to the post-1965 Asian American writing practice and stresses the specific historicities of varying displacements of new immigrants, whose senses of national identity always feature instability and contradiction. Modernism offers a paradigm of the need for an exploration and expression about the Self that differs from the pre-1965 immigrant writers. However, modernist writing in Asian American fiction is understandably not quite the same as the Euro-American modernism. The difference between them yields Rachel Adams’s positivity about modernist ethnic writers in her critique of the impersonation of Euro-American modernists—it reminds me of the stale description of Asians in America, *not quite white*, even though in an approbatory way. She presumes that “[r]elatively unburdened by the legacies of Euro-American modernism or the politics of the Cold War, [American ethnic] fiction reacts against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while

providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents” (251). Her point is made and her good intention should not be denied. While she criticizes that postmodern American literature refers to the national border as dead ends instead of live cultural spaces, dystopian domains rather than progressive territories, and points to the subjects of the border as a cluster of displaced automatons by overlooking any possibility of promise and life, she gives credit to “American ethnic writers” for their positive contribution to American literature in the border theme: the border, in American literary postmodernism, “is less a real locale than a name for one of many forms of restless disappointment” (Adams 257). According to Adams, it is the infusion of new immigrant writers like Jhumpa Lahiri that rescue American literary innovation from postmodernist unilateral repetition and shift American literary loci from a postmodern wasteland to a global horizon of promises.

An irresolution of identity is the mere modernist component Lahiri deploys, as the novel “dramatizes the difficulty of allowing its characters to be fully penetrated by a moment of multiple and converging crises that offer no magical routes toward resolution, a moment that may, in fact, present itself as not interested in resolutions of any kind” (Song 347). Her characters, instead of standing out as individuals, should be read as a whole to understand the duration of self-identification as an Asian American because each character is fragmentation of the racial form of Asian America, which embraces “systematic inequalities built into cultural institutions, economies, and geographies” (Lowe 96). This is why Lahiri refuses to criticize her characters, even when Moushumi betrays Gogol; she simply explores. It also partially explains why Lahiri is considered as a realist by most Asian Americanists: in addition to her technique of mimicking the reality of her immigrant characters, she does not give up the basic uniformity of Asian American realist fiction, in which every character is representative of a certain Asian

American collective as a whole. Her hesitance to embrace modernism in her writing testifies the inability of literary modernism to represent Asian American experiences because of its characteristic as “negation of history” (Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* 21). According to Lukács, the modernist hero is “strictly confined within the limits of his own experience” and has no personal history (*Realism in Our Time* 21), while *The Namesake* ostensibly opens to personal histories. But some potential counterarguments would jeopardize such realist reading of the novel. The first counterargument is on modernism itself. Secondly, it is about the content of the novel. And the third one lies in the difference between the Western modernism and Asian American modernism.

First of all, in response to Lukács’s accusation of modernism for its static examination of reality, delineation of distorted human experience, and absence of meaning, Fredric Jameson points out that Lukács’s theory rests on a deceptive typology that simplifies the distinction between matter and spirit. He reminds the reader of the common sense of fiction, that is, the start point of fiction “must always be subjective, must always be human experience: the objective term, the outside world, scarcely bothers to dream of its reconciliation with man” (*Marxism and Form* 174). In modern times, the fictional structure discontinues its established form with hardwired conventions that suggest closure, like tragedy or epic; rather, “it is problematic... a hybrid form which must be reinvented at every moment of its development” (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 172). This discrepancy is exemplified in the dimension of the hero. When “the epic hero represented a collectivity, formed part of a meaningful, organic world” (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 172), the fictional society and its relationship with the hero —usually oppositional— become dominant in the plot. Modern novels address the fragmentation of wholeness that cannot be represented by any individual character. Just as the modern human beings come to be less

typical and more dismantled, and the modern society becomes more idiosyncratic, just as the states find themselves “pressed to stay open by the forces of media, technology, and travel” (Appadurai 40), and as the mirage of the universe becomes more translucent along the lines of old and new colonialism, globalization, and migration, modern fictional characters become less powerful in grappling with the self and the environment around them, hence fragmented. What defines a text realist is its mimesis of the real world in every possible way. Because the world by nature is a fragmented entity, even though today’s realists intend to present a representative character in their writings, what they try to mimic is fragmentation devoid of representativeness and the representativity of characters is shattered as well. Whether an individual character can represent a certain collective is still in question.

Secondly, while most Asian American critics regard Lahiri as a realist, some scholars identify Lahiri with postmodernism for her usage of allegory through Gogol’s romantic relationships, which are overcoats to his self-identification, and additionally Ashima’s pregnancy. Lahiri identifies foreignness with lifelong pregnancy—“a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts” and “something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect” (NS 49-50). However, allegory is not only applied to postmodernist literary productions; it originated from the classical era. So her usage of allegory is not sufficient to attach her writing to postmodernism. What should be noticed is the unique disclosure at the ending, which surrenders the novel to modernism<sup>8</sup>. James Knapp appreciates the genre of disclosure and plays it up so as to accentuate the possibility of modernism:

[W]hen modernist writers speak about similar attempts to foreclose history..., then the writer’s own use of a very different kind of discourse—open, indeterminate, and inviting

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<sup>8</sup> Some may argue that such a disclosure also occurs to *All I Asking for Is My Body*. I want to remind the reader that *All I Asking for Is My Body* is the first book of a serial. Its disclosure at the end is meant for the next book.

the reader's active participation, for example—assumes a meaning it could not have had if the writer had not introduced the idea that language which presents itself as seamless and inevitable can be a means of social repression. (48)

Lahiri portrays an opposition between, simply speaking, the Traditionalist and the Marginal Man, what is given and what is chosen—to borrow Françoise Kral's interpretation, but also suggests that the opposition is possible, existent, and optional. She does not propose reconciliation between the oppositions because reconciliation means resolutions and hence closure. She does imply a possibility of reconciliation by making Gogol start reading Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat," but refuses to assure the reader that Gogol is about to find his Self through "The Overcoat." (Such a writing strategy habituates the novel: Lahiri always stops where we assume a punch line should be provided.) Instead, she indicates the vanishing of the name "from the lips of loved ones" (NS 289). Along with the hope dies the solidarity of holding that hope. Gogol is never articulate and always confused. Unlike model minorities, he does not fulfill the essentials of the ethnic *Bildungshelden*. His transformation is definitely visible; but where the transformation ends—the teleology—remains unaddressed. Min H. Song infers that Gogol is "an exemplary representative of the Asian children of post-1965 immigrants of professional background who have been lovingly and anxiously fantasized into existence over the past several decades" (355). However, without examining modernism or postmodernism in a systematic way, Song cannot commit Gogol to the representative agency of the wholeness and handily give the novel a closure. By making Moushumi return to Paris<sup>9</sup> and letting Ashima veer

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<sup>9</sup> I use the word "return" in a different situation from Natalie Friedman's argument. Friedman understands Moushumi as "not content to assimilate to any cultural norm" and "she breaks with the normative romantic tradition within which her family operates and changes the paradigm of India-to-America emigration. She also challenges the notion of 'return'—after her marital voyage with Gogol, she chooses not to return to her family or ethnic community,

between the United States and India, Lahiri rejects a limitation of defining the homeland. In addition, instead of criticizing any of her characters, who symbolize differing phases and spectra of Asian American identities, Lahiri expresses her wish to be “limitless, without borders” (Lahiri, *NS* 26) and thus unable to be defined. By encompassing a sense of cosmopolitanism, Lahiri interrupts her realist consistency with modernist constituents and thus deconstructs the representativeness and closure of realism within the text itself. Her decline to offer reconciliation is forgivable and necessitated: after all, genuine reconciliation is illusionary and utopian. This speaks for both realism and modernism.

No wonder that most Asian American critics find Lahiri a glib realist. Compared with archetypal modernists or postmodernists, such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence, Lahiri is too intelligible and physical. *The Namesake* does not truly possess the modernist gist: distortion and ahistoricity—no collective history of Asian Americans is set forth, but personal histories, separation between subjectivity and objectivity, and stagnancy are still displayed. To *modernize* her appears to be a farfetched argument. However, just as the Asian American studies means to de-center the Euro-ethnography of the U.S., a modernist application to literature and its criticism demands such an act of de-centralization as well. Malcolm Bradbury and James Mcfarlane sum up the characteristics of modernism through Nietzsche: “the task of art is its own self-realization, outside and beyond established orders, in a world of abnormally drawn perspectives. ‘What strikes me as beautiful, what I should like to do, is a book about nothing, a book without external attachments, which would hold itself together by itself through the internal force of its style’” (25). In a word, modernists detest reality and its

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and she rejects American pluralism for European urbanity, exile, and expatriate life” (122-123). In my reading of Moushumi, *return* does not have to refer to the distant so-called homeland.

allegiance and modernism is private and arcane. Then the question is: Can Asian American literature be modernist?

Christopher Schedler unfolds the color-blind modernism and applies it with a little twist to Chicano American literature, in which modernism is enriched and specified as *border modernism*. The practitioners of border modernism “are sometimes modernist exiles from the metropolis engaged with cultures on the border, sometimes writers from the border engaged with modernist theories and practices from the metropolis” (Schedler xi). Like all theorists of modernism, Schedler examines modernism as opposed to realism, which “continued as a viable form of representation” during an era of modernity that is bonded with progress and enlightenment (xii). But the uniqueness of border modernism, according to Schedler, lies in its engagement with non-mainstream modernism, or ethnic modernism. Schedler recognizes modernist responses to the inner world of the individual, who dissociates the self from the external world. Such an alienating act constructs his self-identification “through an internalized view of the urban world” (xii); therefore, identity in modernist literature “is affirmed not through identification with but through assertion of difference from and objectification of the ‘other’” (Schedler xiii; Nicholls 197). What distinguishes modernism with the affix<sup>10</sup> *border* from its mainstream meta-narrative is the inscription of history, which always seems more appertaining to realism and meanwhile unconcerned by modernism. Schedler assures that border modernism entails history as a “baggage that continually returns to condition the present and cannot simply be lost, forgotten, or exchanged” (124). It is through history and traditions that border modernists continue to seek and create “modern identities and aesthetic forms” (124). In other words, while the mainstream modernism is often understood as a breakage from traditional forms of

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<sup>10</sup> Obviously, *border* in the ideation of ethnic modernism is not an affix but rather simply an adjective. However, the function of the affix not only defines but confines, differentiates and confirms the differences while the purpose of adjectives is mainly to describe. For this reason, what *border* to modernism is what *Asian* to Americans.

representations, border modernism conceives of individuals and history as a synthetic form: they interact with and construct each other in that “[t]he conception of identity as constituted in relation to the external world and through association with others is represented in border modernism through an emphasis on historical context, oral forms of expression, and simplification” (xiii).

However, unlike most modern Asian American writers, Lahiri does not even make that social historical return for Gogol, whose internalization of the outer world is formed through his objection to part of the self. At this point, Lahiri is true to modernism by distancing the subject and the milieu of the story from the historical context. While she is blamed for depriving Ashoke of any internal struggle and conflicts as an immigrant, Lahiri cannot complete her character portrayals until she is perceived as designating synthesis to her characters, who in a collective attempt accomplish a modernist identification that evokes meanings rather than conveying them (Caesar 106). What modernizes Lahiri and her works is her avoidance of representing ABCD through Gogol, who “never thinks of India as desh” but “thinks of it as Americans do, as India” (Lahiri, *NS* 118). Lahiri does not rectify Gogol’s confused identification by suggesting a *correct* identity for him; nor does she deny the significance of history, which can be demonstrated in the way she organizes the novel. What she actually does is unlearn the history that is taught in the institutions and endow individual subjects with specific meanings and agencies. She presents rather than represents because life is not continuity but fragmentation. By highlighting the ambiguous images of Asian American individual identities, she works “towards spatially [and] through layers of consciousness, working towards a logic of metaphor or form” (Bradbury and McFarlane 50); and this experiment makes her an Asian American modernist.

### Conclusion: National or Post-national?

What kind of Asian are you? It is probably a question that mostly and especially confuses first-generation immigrants. It is hard to answer this question in a serious academic context; but on Google, a commonly shared result divides the Asian masses in America into twelve categories based on the subjects' acknowledgement of both Asian and American cultures and degrees of assimilation: Twinkie, Fob, Asian-American, Yap (Young Asian Professional), SuperFob, Fobabee, Gangsta Fob (Fobsta), Tab (Trendy Asian Bitch), Hoochie Tab, Rice-Boy, Fobulous, and Pob<sup>1</sup>. Though it is considered by some internet users a Chinese American humor, it implies the changing national demography of Asian America that is either strengthened or deconstructed by an affluent flow of new immigrants at the turn of the century.

As is briefly reviewed in chapter two, Sucheng Chan has beheld the vicissitude of Asian American demography and warned Asian America of the modulation of its political façade. Chan's 2003 book, *In Defense of Asian American Studies: the Politics of Teaching and Program Building*, collects essays that document Asian Americanists' effort at establishing and developing Asian American Studies into a viable field of criticism and an institutional visibility on three University of California campuses—Berkeley, Santa Cruz, and Santa Barbara. As an honorable Asian Americanist, Chan offers important insights into the history of Asian American studies and the challenges it has overcome in the past and will experience at present as well as in the future. But her limitations from “her own position of power” (S. Lee 721) are recognizable too. One of these limitations is her dismissal of new immigrant faculties' inscrutable involvement in Asian American discourses.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no official website for this categorization. It does not even seem serious or academically approvable. But a Google research of the title “What Kind of Asian are You?” yields six hundred and sixteen million results that share the same or similar categorizations. One of such categorizations is included in the Appendix.

The last chapter of Chan's book, "Whither Asian American Studies?," is a blatant ploy to secure the Asian Americanists' attention, virtually dragging the reader by collar to the quarrel between nationalist and post-nationalist proposals for the future of Asian American studies. Upon her observation, the new immigrant faculties who are majorly post-nationalists not only attempt to "evade 'minority' status" by using "their middle- or upper-class standing" but also suggest a separation between academia and politics (*In Defense of Asian American Studies* 190). Her narrative is infected by her classist attitude that divides Asian Americans into different classes without bothering to clarify her criteria of such class designation<sup>2</sup>. Bemoaning that it is "the very name of our field—*Asian American studies* or *ethnic studies*" (191; emphasis original) that has put the *old*, local Asian American faculties and the *new* Asian immigrant faculties in a bind, Chan implies that the differences and separation between the old and new minority faculties exist naturally and should be acknowledged and legitimized. Beyond comprehension, Chan reductively groups all new immigrant faculties as middle- or upper-class without providing statistical evidence for such an assumption: ironically, as an estimable Asian American faculty herself, she is also a member of the middle—if not upper-middle—class. These new immigrant faculties ask to have a say in Asian American studies because, according to Chan, this program is usually offered in "prestigious" universities, which makes it easier for them to climb up the career ladder. I could not agree more when she claims that being co-ethnic "does not guarantee a shared consciousness" (191). In fact, it is true to most countries, cultures, communities, families, and peoples. However, her classification of new immigrant faculties appears to conflict the logic of her argument about pan-ethnicity. Therefore, when Philip Q. Yang stated in 2000 that ethnic studies "is by no means synonymous with political activism" (276; qtd. in Chan, *In Defense of*

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<sup>2</sup> Some may argue that Chan does have her criteria of class division. But I would not call it "criteria" if such division is simplistically based upon the entry time of Asian immigrants.

*Asian American Studies* 191), Chan takes its representivity for granted that *all* new immigrant faculties should hold the same perception. In Chan's explanations, the *distance* between old and new Asian American faculties does not simply come from a lack of historical connections and experiences on American soil as sociologists Min Zhou and James Gatewood maintain<sup>3</sup>; it is also "being 'forged' by the newcomers' disdain for the allegedly outmoded goals of the earlier generations of Asian Americanists. The gulf...is being mutually constituted" (192).

Why does Chan "empower" new immigrant faculties with such an adversary impact on Asian American studies? Believing that "it is easier to change an institution from within than without" and "becoming a respected member of the university community is one of the most effective ways to ensure that one's viewpoint is heard and, better yet, gets acted upon" (*In Defense of Asian American Studies* 160), Chan means to remind the *majority* Asian Americanists that the increasing number of new immigrant faculties will change the politically sensitive, progressive, and activist nature of Asian American Studies from within the institutions, where the voice can be mostly articulated and legitimized. The implication is that the generous acceptance of the United States and academic institutions has blinded newcomers to the hidden possibilities of discriminations based on race, class, gender, or sexual orientations, upon which social relations of America are structured. Therefore, the nationalist project of Asian American Studies must maintain its significant status and continue to make such claims on the United

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<sup>3</sup> Zhou and Gatewood interest their research on the increasing divergence of Asian American Studies. They point out, "there is a certain nostalgia among veteran activists, now mainly tenured professors, for the spirit of the 1960s and, to some extent, that yearning for the past ironically threatens to produce a divide between U.S.-born (and/or U.S.-raised) scholars and some of their Asian-born counterparts, especially those whose education in the United States was more likely to begin at the college and graduate level, and who may not share the same connection to a history that they ever experienced. Moreover, the ideological presuppositions of the scholars oriented toward the Movement has the potential to create distance between them and the growing number of Asian American (often Asian-born) scholars who work on Asian American topics, but from the standpoint of the more traditional disciplines of history, sociology, demography, economics, political science, and so on" (7-8). Chan's argument against the Asian-born scholars is certainly aimed at Zhou and Gatewood.

States, despite any interference from such modern theories as transnationalism or post-nationalism boosted by new immigrant faculties.

Chan's advice for the future of Asian American Studies is important but controversial and even presumptuous. The gulf between old and new immigrants does have the aforementioned two causes. But it is not unfathomable that new immigrants do not possess the same sense of belonging as the old groups do. For all the basic differences between the old and new Asian immigrants, it is at first a matter of cultural or national indifference that is more fundamental than ethnic insensitivity: more than a matter of ethnic belonging, it is the consciousness of not feeling obliged to the United States. Unlike the old immigrants, most of whom were pushed by their home countries in Asia and pulled by the imperial power and exuberant wealth of America, new immigrants can leave their countries at their free wills. They are not so willing or eager to cut their ties with Asia, where most of their families live and prosper in the heat of relatively political liberation and economic booms. America offers them a better opportunity for quality education and an option for exploring the world; but America is not the destination of their journey. They were neither cut off from any Western ideological, cultural, or political influence before their migration. Migration is more flexible and feasible than ever before. It more often serves on upgrading one's social and class status in their home countries than saving one from the dire condition of Asia.

To force an ethnic identity upon such new immigrants is to reinforce the imperial spirit of America and reject the existence of the Other within the imagined national boundaries. Although her lucid focuses on new immigrant faculties explains her act of grouping them as middle- or upper-classes, class stratification within them is left out in Chan's argument. While Chan recognizes the affinity of the immediate post-1965 new immigrants to America, she arrays the

post-1970s immigrants in rich and snobbish middle-class loftiness in order to distinguish who are “us”—the old Asian immigrants and their descendants—and who are “them”—the newcomers. But as a potential new immigrant myself, my personal experience and contacts prove that not all new immigrant higher-education receivers come from a middle class background. There is no mystery that these immigrants come to pursuing an American degree on funding in the forms of assistantships or scholarships from American institutions. The early mystification of the rising Four Asian Tigers— Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan—and the current perception of China’s growing wealth alongside the long-recognized hefty economy of Japan cooperatively place Asia as a rival and partner of the U.S. in the global market. After a century’s exploitation and colonization by the imperialist West, no matter how delicate their success is, Asia has finally got the chance to say “No” to America for the first time in nearly two hundred years<sup>4</sup>. However, Asia’s political advancement is not parallel to its economic accomplishment. Human rights issues are used strategically by the U.S. government to intervene Asia’s internal affairs. Democracy, an invention of the Western governmentality, has been gradually recognized by Asian subjects but continues to be confronted by some Asian governments. The dilemma Asia is facing today also put its individual subjects in an impasse. As individuals who have received education from the West, new immigrants long for recognition and acceptance of America. As subjects that have contributed to Asia’s success, new immigrants are reluctant to deny or be denied of their agency as Asians. By reducing the “self-exclusion” of post-1970s immigrant faculties to their middle-class standing and without examining their complex about inbetweenness, Chan levies the U.S. cultural chauvinism and neo-colonialism upon the

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<sup>4</sup> This sense of optimism is still kept at bay due to the complexity of the mutual political and economic affiliation between the U.S. and Asia.

newcomers and refuses to register the agency of ex-colonial Asia-Pacific as well as the postcoloniality of the East and the West.

The result of Aihwa Ong's anthropological research in *Flexible Citizenship* counterbalances Chan's insistence on American nationalism and provides another possibility of self-identification that dwells in the global market shared by Asia and America. Ong's examination of traveling Chinese or Hong Kongese subjects has loudly articulated certain rationalities that shape new immigrants' subject formation. Fully aware of the impingement globalization has brought upon the renovation of the world's economic, political, and cultural purviews, Ong claims that "[t]he realignment of political, ethnic, and personal identities is not necessarily a process of 'win or lose,' whereby political borders become 'insignificant' and the nation-state 'loses' to global trade in terms of its control over the affiliations and behavior of its subjects" (2-3). Clinging to the "flexibility" of transnational migrants'—to be more accurate, Chinese businessmen's—citizenships, Ong defines it as "the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (6). The fluid feature of such citizenship responds to Ong's focus on new relationships between nation-states and capital that are defined by transnationalism and globalization, a concept deduced from Fredric Jameson's commentaries on late capitalism and modernities. The strength of Ong's argumentation relies on *alternative modernities*<sup>5</sup> that function as the new source of "contestations and conflicts over economic, political, and cultural power" (Dirlik 655).

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<sup>5</sup> By "alternative," Aihwa Ong takes her side with neither colonialist nor post-colonialist critique of the global capital and market. The concept of alternative modernities suggests "the kinds of modernity that are (1) constituted by different *sets of relations* between the developmental or postdevelopmental state, its population, and global capital; and (2) constructed by political and social elites who appropriate 'Western' knowledges and *re-present* them as truth claims about their own countries" (A. Ong 35).

But casting her eyes on the global terrain does not spare Ong from limitations and reductive conclusions. There are two particular areas of weakness relevant to my discussion here. Firstly, the targeted subjects of her research are limited to Asian elites. Though she has mentioned the Asian poor here and there, it is not effortful to find out that her informants are mainly the Asian rich. Her concentration on this certain group of Asians will not only enhance the Orientalist image the West has of the East but also falsify the concept of transnationalism from a comprehensive cultural gamut to an exclusive economic scope. Secondly, Ong observes and emphasizes the dissonance between the old migrants—Asian Americans—and the new immigrants—foreign Asians. Criticizing Asian Americans’ distancing themselves from foreign Asians, Ong denotes that “[b]y defending themselves as *Asian* Americans, an ethno-racial category, rather than as American citizens with universal political claims as members of the nation, Asian Americans continue to be trapped by an American ideology that limits the moral claims to social legitimacy of nonwhites” (180; emphasis original). Arif Dirlik criticizes Ong’s perspective as it

fails to explain why the burden should not be on the transnationals who, by her own admission, constantly play the cards of race and diversity in promoting their own interests—in alliance with *their muchachos* in the white power structure, and to the detriment of disadvantaged groups, including other Chinese. Chinese-Americans, too, may contribute to democratic politics more effectively if they choose to ally with other disadvantaged groups, rather than identify with the reified “Chineseness” promoted by translational elites, which presents the greater predicament in the further racialization of American politics. (655)

According to the logic of Dirlik's critique, Sucheng Chan has done the job that Ong fails to do. But both Chan and Ong only tell one side of the story. Apart from this, both scholars have pointed out the arising and continuing tension between old and new Asian immigrants. Such a tension is vividly pictured by the Q & A session that is broached in the beginning of the conclusion: "What kind of Asian are you"?

The categorization indicated in the responses to the above question is certainly not objective or well supported by any academic research. It should be studied as a cultural phenomenon rather than a sociological assumption because there is little evidence to prove its accuracy or validity. Most interesting and revealing about such categorization is its neglect of the distinctions between the American-born and the Asian-born emphasized in scholarly arguments. Instead, it tends to mingle all Asians in America together, and thus on this front, idealizes Asian American pan-ethnicity. In spite of vehement debate in academia, the way the Asian American community finesses their own identities imparts a vulgar but reasonable message that jibes at the division between the American-born and the Asian-born.

Prior to Sucheng Chan and Aihwa Ong, King-kok Cheung has publicized her standpoint on the matter of the then trend of Asian American Studies. Cheung points out that identity politics was giving up to a stress on heterogeneity and diaspora, to which Chan must agree: it is a shift

from seeking to "claim America" to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and on masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality; from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism. ("Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies" 1)

Unlike Chan and Ong, Cheung advocates neither nationalism nor transnationalism or postcolonialism for Asian American Studies. Though she acknowledges that it is no longer practical to stress “nativity as the *sine qua non* for Asian American sensibility” (3) as the affluent flow of foreign-born Asians after 1965 and the “insistence on American nativity can result in the double exclusion of current Asian immigrants—by non-Asians and by American-born Asians alike” (6), Cheung does not recommend the superseding of transnationalism over nationalism. From a global and transnational perspective, Cheung reaches a partial agreement with Chan that “Asian American literary studies must also keep alive the impetus to claim America. Otherwise the field may swing from excluding the voices of immigrants to marginalizing those of American-born Asians” (9). It is possible to manifest and assert the presence of Asians in North America and maintain transnational consciousness. My analyses of the selected Asian American novels have partially subscribed to Cheung’s encouragement and conclusiveness, though from a different angle.

This dissertation has ambitiously attempted to outline the historical trajectory of Asian American literature in light of its forms. This ambition is nothing unheard of; but the route is nouveau. From survival to transformation to contradiction, this categorization is not meant to designate a limit to Asian American literary studies. Though it follows a formalistic approach to reading literature, its purpose is to dismantle the binary Self/Other, assimilationist/anti-assimilationist, national/transnational mode of culture. Examining the process of Asian Americans from “becoming American” to “being American” through realistic and modernistic applications, my emphasis is placed upon an assumption that despite the false claim of pan-Asianism and differences between ethnic writers of Asian America, Asian American literature follows a pattern that is formalistically recognizable and parallel to a modern development of

American literature, though delayed and modified; such a form study of Asian American literature enables the viability of the so-called pan-ethnicity in a concept of subject formation. Although nativity of Asian American identity politics remains at the core in Asian American studies and its literature, the interpretability of novels has suggested possibilities of its reading practice in a transnational domain. These possibilities are not only determined by a deconstructive inquiry of the nation-state itself but also decided by the contingent nature of Asian America as well as the studies whereof.

Asian America paradoxically emerged out of the nature of American modernity. Marshall Berman observes the Western experience of modernity in three historical phases: 16th century—late 18th century; the 1790s—early 20th-century; and the 20th century. Phase one hardly noticed the hit of modern life. Phase two witnessed the emergence and unfolding of modernism and modernization. It is learned to be “an age that generates explosive upheavals in every dimension of personal, social and political life” (Berman 17). In the final phase, the Western modernity, which features fragmentariness and incommensurability, becomes universal by taking over the whole world in an obtrusive, forceful manner. However, Arjun Appadurai seems more positive about the final phase of modernity. He insists on the dialectical logic in the Western modernity and reflects on the resistant agency of the existent social forces in that “[t]he megaheretic of developmental modernization...is often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music and other expressive forms, which allow modernity to be rewritten more as vernacular globalization and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies” (10). Whether or not Asian America began with the first flow of Chinese immigrants to America in the nineteenth century, Asian American Studies were initiated at the final phase of modernity as a challenge to and divergence from “a strict adherence to the liberal

social contract of the modern West” (Appadurai 23). This may sound contentious: both Asian America and its studies are “by-products” of the U.S. modernization and therefore ingrained in American national and transnational narratives.

This challenge and divergence is repeated and specified by Françoise Lionnet and Shumei Shih in their project on transnationalism. Borrowing from Sarah Mahler, the co-authors use the concepts of *transnationalism from above* and *transnationalism from below* to distinguish variegated modes of transnational activities: whereas the former “is associated with the utopic views of globalization, which celebrate the overcoming of national and other boundaries for the constitution of a liberal global market, the hybridization of cultures, and the expansion of democracies and universal human rights,” the latter is “the sum of the counterhegemonic operations of the nonelite who refuse assimilation to one given nation-state, including ‘everyday practices of ordinary people’” (Mahler 66-68; Lionnet and Shih 6). The notion of minor transnationalism as “an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries” deconstructs the Manichaeic relationships within “this binary model of above-and-below, the utopic and the dystopic, and the global and the local” (Lionnet and Shih 7). Hybridity of cultures often occurs unexpectedly and unconsciously. Cultures are not monadic. Lionnet and Shih’s theorization of *minor transnationalism* complicates the overarching general theory of transnationalism, which is posed against by nationalist critics like Sucheng Chan, through interfering the U.S. national discourses—including those of Asian American ones—with “the traumas of colonial, imperial, and global hegemonies as well as the affective dimensions of transcolonial solidarities continue to work themselves out and produce new possibilities” (21). In other words, they allow the monolithic nationalist discourses to be interrupted by dissents, who have often undergone a

transition from “there” to “here” and become unassimilated (not *inassimilable*) subjects. The migrant experience of the minorities is so formative and constructive that they are already indebted to cultural resources outside the dominant culture of the adopted countries. The voices of dissents are not bound to dismiss the national project of Asian Americanism. Rather, the most basic challenge the migrant dissents have to face is an accusation of betrayal from their homeland and by the people they once loved and associated with, especially for new immigrant writers, such as Ha Jin.

Growing up in the chaos of embryonic Communist China, Ha Jin moved to the U.S. as a graduate student and decided to stay in America after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Both an immigrant and a self-exile, Ha Jin took upon him to be a spokesperson for the downtrodden Chinese by first viewing himself as “a Chinese writer who would write in English..., unaware of the complexity and infeasibility of the position” (Jin 3-4) he holds on to. His early works, including *Under the Red Flag* (1997), *In the Pond* (1998), *Waiting* (1999), and *The Crazy* (2002), take so much of China as his mere subject matter that the reader cannot easily spot anything American in his books except for the written language—English. But the language matters the most; it is the ultimate betrayal because after the linguistic betrayal, “any other act of estrangement amounts to a trifle” (Jin 31). Inspired by Conrad and Nabokov, Ha Jin looked into English for his own personal voice that was prohibited in Mainland China. The vision of this Asian civilization—it is probably more barbarian than civilized in the eyes of the American readers—presented in Ha Jin’s works coincides with the Western imagination of Communist China. Ha Jin’s portrayal responds to the curiosity and fear of the West towards the Red East. Therefore, though he accidentally solidifies the Orientalist interpretation of China, Ha Jin’s

success is not accidental<sup>6</sup>. However, the setups of Ha Jin's narratives have been moved away from China only recently. His lengthy novel, *A Free Life* (2007), initiated his exploration of the migrants' lives in modern America<sup>7</sup>. But this gesture of claiming America does not lead him to public, academic recognition as an Asian American writer. The twenty-six-page interview with Ha Jin conducted by Jerry A. Varsava in 2010 still focuses on his life experiences in China and his comments on such experiences. Aside from this public cognizance of Ha Jin, he is rarely studied by Asian American literary and cultural critics. Although nearly thirty years ago Elaine Kim has bespoken a fair wish that literature written about Asia by Asian Americans in English along with books about American experience in Asian languages would be considered in Asian American Studies some day in the future (*Asian American literature*, xi-xii), the wish is still just a wish.

Then I would like to ask the same question that arises in many Asian Americanists' argumentation and, I believe, occurs to the majority Asian American authorship: in the twenty-first century, where is Asian American literature going? At the end of her book on the interactions between the Bildungsroman and Asian American national commission, Patricia Chu has a prediction about the development of Asian American literature—fiction, to be more accurate—in her examination of the debate between Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin. She envisages a moment for Asian American literature

when Asian American subjects and their stories will be read as “American,” when the

histories now laboriously or didactically asserted will be gracefully integrated into a

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<sup>6</sup> I dedicate my gratitude to Professor Shawn Wong concerning my critical reading of Ha Jin. He informed me of the ideology behind.

<sup>7</sup> On a grey, bleak November day of 2007, the Seattle Public Library Downtown Branch held a lecture, where Ha Jin was invited as the speaker. Sitting among the diverse audience, which comprised a small group of non-Chinese and non-Asians, I asked the writer why he moved his subject matter away from native China and set up his story in America in *A Free Life*. His answer was simple: when he just started writing, he only knew about China and little about America; having spent two decades in the U.S., this country has become more acquainted to him. The image of China was gradually fading and lives in the past, alienated memories.

wider American consciousness, and when both literary traditions and American political arenas will be transformed to include both new and longtime subjects. At such a moment, Asian American stories that are not about identity, assimilation, exclusion, or internment—in a word, race—will be both accepted and understood, and the need to construct Asian American culture as a luminal site, a place of political resistance and critique, will be obsolete. (187)

This is the moment when Asian American literature can liberate itself from a social, historical, and political bound and find its voice as *literature*. But this moment cannot be achieved until the national politics frees itself from racialized constitution. Only until this moment can Asian American literature become truly intimate.

Chu's wish from a decade ago seems likely to become fulfilled in the new era of the twenty-first century. The application of literary form to studying Asian American novels proves that Asian American literary subject matters have gradually but not fully shifted from a collective identity to an individuated one. Though the latter is not void of collective cultural identity, the protagonists in late modernist Asian American novels have become less representative of an ethnic anxiety for national visibility, such as William Paulinha in *Fixer Chao*. Inclusion that is theorized in early Asian American literature as the ultimate goal of survival has ceased to be concerned by some Asian American writers. On the contrary, novels like *The Namesake* move beyond the inclusion project and sophisticate the self-identification of the protagonist by presenting the inner contradiction of the character, challenging the distinctions between the Self and the Other on a psychological level, and asking the question, "What is after assimilation?"

Behind the possibility of such a future for Asian American literature, there are other questions awaiting inquiries in more depth: What is the function of Asian American literature? What is the relationship between Asian American literature and Asian American studies? Does Asian American literature have to remain outside of the aesthetic traditions of literary criticism? Is Asian America ready for a personal, intimate literary persona that differs from the entirety of Asian American cultural and political imaginations? Is any dissonance from the mainstream Asian Americanism a betrayal of Asian America? Why up till now have the positions of literature written about Asia by Asian Americans in English, about American experience in Asian languages, or about Asian experience by Asian Americans in Asian languages not been slightly addressed in Asian American discourses? How do we recognize different types of Asian visa-holders in America? Whither is Asian American studies going? Just as Colleen Lye admits that it is difficult to agree on “where to draw the line between Asian American literature and Asian Anglophone literature, or for that matter Asian literature in any language at all” (“Introduction” 3), the legitimization of Asian American studies are facing more challenges due to too many possibilities that were deprived before.

There must be a reason that fiction became the most prominent genre of Asian American literature besides autobiographies and poems. Richard Lehan’s sociological argument maintains that the novel was originated in the middle class because “[t]he bourgeoisie wanted a fiction of its own, and the novel gave expression to the fate of the individual in a New World” (*Realism and Naturalism* 34). Though it has not quite experienced the old Roman era as the Western literature did, Asian American literature subsists on the European and American literary traditions of writing. The approach to studying Asian American fiction developed in this dissertation points to the existence of Asian American literary formality. When fiction obtains a

commanding presence in Asian American literature, it induces a fact that the middle class has emerged among Asian Americans. If such a fact cannot be proven through realism—after all, Marxists and leftists have effected a significant system of socialistic realism in the tradition of realism and its critique—, adoptions of modernism and post-modernism shall do the work.

Initiated in the form of realism, Asian American fiction keeps its focus on a collective identity until the appearance of modernism, which centralizes—though not necessarily, but possibly—individuated subject matters that are likely not resonant with a historical commonality shared by all Asian American ethnicities. This later form of fiction renders a private conversation between the writer and the reader feasible.

In order to track the historical formation of Asian American literature, a range of novels that reflect Asian American experiences have been analyzed in this dissertation. These texts are concerned with constructing dissonance through forms familiar to the American audience at large. They create a public sphere for the once silenced voices and make these voices unanimous as an Asian American conviction in order to be heard by the historically philistine American society. The activities of unifying the putatively disparate voices are made possible and even necessary for two circumstantial reasons. First, Asian American history has to be rescued from oblivion through plangent articulation. This articulation demands a collective participation for the reason that Asian American subjects have altogether shared a history of oppression and discrimination. Second, even after the emergence of a bourgeois Asian America, Asian Americans collectively as the “Other” race still lack a tradition that can write itself into existence in American cultural history. Constructing a discourse that rejects, challenges, confronts, and revises other dominant discourses “is a prerequisite for inventing a tradition and for imagining a community” (Stein 171). On this front, the discourse of Asian America as a gesture of

dissonance bespeaks that the concept of racial formation is essential to the U.S. national identification.

Asian American studies are founded on the grand national narratives, that is, racial formation, which, “despite its name, is never only about race or even class” (Nguyen, “At Home with Race” 1559), the critique thereof, and American Orientalism. Asian American literature, however, allows an interference of private matters into a collective display, especially when displacement and alienation are able to be found inside the “quasi-geographical term” of *Asian America* (Wong, “Denationalization Reconsidered” 4). Early in 1995, Sau-Ling C. Wong with great discretion called for legitimation of denationalizing Asian American studies by debunking the imagined boundaries of the nation-state of Asian America and therefore liberating Asian American literary form from a constitutive and institutional paradigm. Even before then, Asian American writers already started to step into the once *untouchable* and *invisible* zones: in terms of the subject matter, some put emphases on the class-stratification inside Asian America, such as *Fixer Chao*; on the level of formality, some take an *irregular* modernist or postmodernist form, such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* (1982) and Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975). Such experimental Asian American writing activities that cross lines of literary forms impose an inquiry upon the concept of Asian America itself, which can be formed in Kandice Chuh’s deconstructive practice of the matrices of Asian American studies: “‘Asian American,’ in short, cannot stand as the national subject, nor can it be understood outside the context of the material conditions of its formation” (23). The historical development of fiction and its limitations in both form and content—we can also say, the fluidity of fiction—testify against a uniform, monolithic, essentialist and stable conception of Asian America.

Literary stabilization and canonization have been severely criticized by Lisa Lowe. She restores the functional significance of the so-called “minor” literature in American institutionalization of literature. By “minor,” Lowe clearly points to ethnic literature that has been ignored by the Euro-centric institutions and readership. When Lowe argues that “a ‘minor’ literature may conform to the criteria of the ‘major’ literature, or it may interrupt the function of reconciliation by challenging the concepts of identity and identification and by voicing antagonisms to the universalizing narrative of development” (*Immigrant Acts* 43), I tend to question about our designation of the “minor”-within-the “minor,” which lags between ethnicities, genders, race, and class. The *double minored* literature is double marginalized and alienated. Heterogeneity should be expressed and attended to in an unbounded field of literary texts by writers at varying distances. Transnationalism and diaspora discourses enrich Asian American studies and literature instead of reducing it to a problematic, subjected national narrative that has been questioned by Asian American Studies itself.

Though framed as part of Asian American studies, Asian American literature has more “freedom” than history, anthropology, or sociology in dealing with Asian American identity politics. From realism to modernism and postmodernism, Asian American literature is not confined to mimesis, or a passive reflection of reality. From nationalism to cosmopolitanism and postcolonialism, via its trans-location, Asian American literature will outgrow its earlier limitation and question the established legitimacy of pan-ethnic and classless Asian American subjectivity. The fact that individual subjects have taken shape over time proves the disparateness within a uniformed process of Asian American subject formation. The initial impact of transnationalism in the field of Asian American Studies from its inception has grounded the field itself in the textures of difference. Even without considering the influences of

the post-1965 new immigration pattern, continuing adoptions of a “Western” form of literary production and formation has already decided its direction of development. While the Western literature and literary studies have reached an era of deconstruction, post-modernism, post-nationalism, and post-colonialism, Asian American literature and literary studies will not linger in the old form and the ideology embodied in such form for too long.

### *Coda*

After the 2008 financial crisis caused by a liquidity shortfall in the United States banking system, the entire world has been experiencing an extended recession ever since. U.S. households and financial institutions were increasingly indebted or overleveraged during the years preceding the crisis and became worse after. Greece is battling bankruptcy, which will possibly turn this ancient nation into Europe’s Lehman Brothers. The Irish bailout may fail too. The Eurozone is speculated of disintegration. On 5 August 2011, for the first time in the history of ratings, credit rating agency Standard and Poor’s downgraded the United States’ sovereign long-term crediting rating from AAA to AA-plus, which immediately triggered international concern. The global stock market plunged by over a hundred points. Non-mainstream economists have predicted that the financial crisis of America is a symptom of the systematic crisis of capitalism. The late-2000s financial and economic crisis is the worst since the 1930s. It not only puts the United States and Europe in the midst of a significant economic slowdown but also substantiates that how far the global financial market has drawn Asia into its system. Asia became more integrated into the global economy than ever before. Neither America and Europe nor Asia can reject the tendency of globalization. The global consequences of the U.S. 2008

economic crisis and ensuing recession ultimately destructed the imagined national border of the United States, so too that of Asian America.

It is the era of globalization. Even the furthest corner of the earth has been reached by this globalizing power. On the one hand, it intensifies the modernity of human society. On the other hand, no previous historical times have supported globalization as profusely and expansively as the modern era. The dialectical, uneven dynamics of globalization—universalization vs. particularization, homogenization vs. differentiation, integration vs. fragmentation, centralization vs. decentralization, juxtaposition vs. syncretization (McGrew 478-80)—necessitate multi-dimensional creations and interpretations. Asian America was and is mutually permeated with Asia, as Sau-ling Wong claims by “denationalization”; and such interpenetration does not only happen between Asia and Asian America. The indigenes of Asia has long before been interrupted, disfigured, modified, and even reversely amplified during the process of globalization. The Asian immigrants are attracted to the West, especially the United States, not only by its prosperity but also by its ideology. Asian intellectuals and middle class voluntarily and actively introduce the Western values to the East while American scholars, including Asian Americanists, interrogate the U.S. political and cultural progressions by studying the success of Asia. Globalization during the violent imperial wars has been transformed into economic competition, technological cooperation, and political pluralism.

In the modern times of globalization, literature goes global too and has more successfully reduced the effectiveness of national boundaries than any domains that practice power or address a political order. Literature not only goes transnational but also becomes diasporic. When modern critics claim to do away with literature by testing historiography, sociology, anthropology, or psychoanalysis on it, literature despite all the criticism appears and reappears.

When Asian American writers go through amazing feats of self-alienation, face the nothingness of human affairs, or offer no insights into life but ennui, or simply present characters with no names that suggest Asian, can we still call them Asian American writers and read their works as Asian American literature? What is the mission of Asian American criticism when it subordinates literature to social sciences or when it cannot read its own literature? What is the point of literature when it has to retain a scientific status of ethnography? Paul de Man has implied the answer: without considering literature as “a primary source of knowledge,” criticism would be inconceivable (19).

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## Appendix What Kind of Asians are You?

### Twinkie

- Besides your nationality, there is little to distinguish you from white people
- Your significant other is not Asian and never has been
- You have few Asian friends, if any
- You are embarrassed at family events because you cannot speak your language and everyone has to switch to English to communicate with you
- You have no idea that the other types of Asians on this list even exist
- You think Hello Kitty is dumb and do not know what Sanrio is
- You are the only Asian on this list that does not know what Bubble Tea is
- You drive a Ford or some other domestic car and if you drive a Honda, it is stock

### Asian-American

- You claim yourself as Asian, but real Asians think you're whitewashed and non-Asians see you as a foreigner. You fit in nowhere
- You have heard of Bubble Tea but have never actually had any
- You are confused about your cultural identity and express this frustration through spoken word performances at your college
- You read A. magazine and think it's great
- You do not know who Leon, Aaron, Sammi, Hikki, or Kangta are
- You are only vaguely aware of the other Asians below

### Yap (Young Asian Professional)

- You are in one of these professions:
  - a) Medicine / Pharmaceutical
  - b) Engineering
  - c) Finance
  - d) Investment Banking
  - e) Accounting
- Most of your wardrobe was purchased at Banana Republic
- You go to "mixers" on Thursday nights to meet other Yaps and talk about the Dow Jones.
- You did exactly what your parents wanted you to do and as a result, your life is hella boring
- Your apartment/home is decorated almost exclusively with stuff from Pier 1
- Your parents always talk to their friends about how much money you make. If they don't, then you're a disappointment

### Fob (Fresh Off the Boat)

- You were not born in America
- You know who Leon, Aaron, Sammi, Hikki, and Kangta are. In fact, you have seen them at Atlantic City or Las Vegas recently
- You speak your native language fluently and so do all your friends
- You do not have any non-Asian friends
- Your parents do not speak any English
- When you speak English, you like to make everything plural

- You get extremely good grades in school
- You cannot dance
- Your fashion sense comes from whatever country you're from and you incorporate nothing from American fashion into your wardrobe

#### SuperFob

- Your command of the English language is minimal and you don't care
- You like dim sum chicken feet
- You do not own a single CD, VCD, Video game, or DVD that isn't bootlegged
- Your only hangout is Chinatown
- All the lights in your house are fluorescent
- You dry your cloths outside your window
- You need a haircut
- You either smell like cigarettes or food

#### Fobabee

- You are an Asian-American or Twinkie who has recently "awoken"
- You have a newly found fetish of Asian girls/boys
- You have taken the Asian Studies course at college
- You are trying to learn as much as possible about your culture to make up for your lifetime of trying to be white (Twinkie; Banana) or Black (Chigger; Tea egg)
- If you are lucky, you will grow to become Fobulous

#### Gangsta Fob (Fobsta)

- You have shot another Asian
- Your favorite hangout is a pool hall
- When you talk, you sound like a cross between a Fob and an urban black kid
- Your hair looks silly, but no one will tell you because you'll shoot them
- You have a serious gambling problem
- You are a Rice-boy, but your mods are cheap and are never painted to match the rest of your car
- No one tells you your rice ride looks cheap because you'll shoot them
- You want to have a Tab girlfriend, but can only get Hoochie Tabs

#### Tab (Trendy Asian B\*tch)

- You shop at A/X, Bebe and Club Monaco
- You only wear black and will occasionally wear white to "mix it up"
- You do not weigh more than 105 lbs
- You have never paid for dinner at a restaurant in your life
- Platform heels are your favorite
- You are a makeup expert, in fact, you appear completely flawless
- You do not smile in public
- You are the object of desire of all Asian men and you know it
- You smoke
- Your cell phone is completely customized
- On the inside flip of your cell phone is a sticker pic of you and your man

- Somewhere in your purse is a Sanrio item
- You only date Asian and will only date a boy with a nice car
- You are often seen with Rice-boys
- You never travel alone. You are either in the company of other Tabs or your Rice-boy boyfriend

#### Hoochie Tab

- You are an import car model
- Your boobs are not real
- There are naked pictures of you floating around on the internet somewhere
- Stiletto heels are your favorite
- Your role models are Francine Dee and Kaila Yu
- Your boyfriend is a Gangsta Fob
- You cheat on your boyfriend
- Unlike most Asians, you do not do well in school

#### Rice-Boy

- You drive an Asian import. Usually a Honda or Acura
- Your souped up car (known as a Rice-ride or Rice-rocket) is unrecognizable from it's original stock form
- Your exhaust pipe is big enough for your head to fit in
- The spoiler on your car looks like it was made by Boeing
- The interior of your car also looks like it was designed by Boeing
- You always drive like you are racing someone
- You are not afraid of dying in a crash, but you are afraid of speed bumps and parking lot on-ramps
- The only other person besides yourself who can sit in your car is your 105 lbs Tab girlfriend. If anyone else sits in your car, the entire bottom of it will be touching the ground
- Even though your car is a Honda, it goes faster and is worth more than a Lotus Esprit
- If you drive a Civic, your dream car is a Supra. If you drive a Supra, your dream car is a Skyline (which you can never have). Poor Rice-boy.

#### Fobulous

- You speak perfect English and you are fluent in your native language
- You have Asian friends as well as non-Asian friends
- You listen to Asian pop as well as American music
- You are equally aware of both popular American culture and Asian pop culture
- You are a good dancer
- You date Asian by choice even though you could rock the opposite sex of any other race
- You are a good designer and have superior Html skills
- You have an Apt107 page AND an AA page and the guest books in both are packed
- For you, FOB stands for Fabulous Oriental Being
- You have lots of Asian pride

#### Pob

- A Filipino fob.

- Words that start with F tend to be pronounced with a P.
- Full accent

Curriculum Vitae  
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EDUCATION

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- |              |  |      |
|--------------|--|------|
| <b>Ph.D.</b> | Department of English, University of Washington, Seattle, USA                                  | 2012 |
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|              | Field: American Literature, Saul Bellow, Postcolonial Studies                                  |      |
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RESEARCH INTERESTS

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Asian American Literary and Cultural Studies, American Realism, Modernism, Class Theory

FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS & AWARDS

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|---|--------------|
| Teaching Assistantship, Department of English, Univ. of Washington, Seattle, USA      | 2007–present |
| Excellent Graduate Student Award, the Education Department of Henan Province, China   | 2006         |
| Excellent Graduate Student Award, Zhengzhou University, Henan Province, China         | 2004–2005    |
| Excellent Graduation Thesis Award (B.A.), Zhengzhou University, Henan Province, China | 2005         |
| Excellent Graduate Leadership Award, Zhengzhou University, Henan Province, China      | 2003–2004    |

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE (Sept. 2007–Mar. 2012)

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Instructor, ENGL 242 (Reading Prose Fiction), Dept. of English, Univ. Of Washington

Instructing college students in practicing critical interpretation and meaning in works of prose fiction.

Instructor, ENGL 200 (Reading Literary Forms), Dept. of English, Univ. Of Washington

Instructing college students in reading and enjoying literature in its various forms: drama, prose fiction, and film, and in examining such features of literary meanings as imagery, characterization, narration, and patterning in sound and sense.

Instructor, ENGL 111 (English Composition: Literature), Dept. of English, Univ. Of Washington

Instructing college students in college composition and communication; class topics derived from reading and discussing novel and essays.

Instructor, ENGL 131 (English Composition: Expository), Dept. of English, Univ. Of Washington

Instructing freshmen college students in composition and communication; class topics derived from a variety of personal, academic, and public subjects.

## EXTRACURRICULAR AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

- 
- Panel Chair, Association of Asian American Studies Annual Conference, May 18–21, New Orleans, USA 2011
  - Tutor, English Writing Center, Univ. Of Washington Nov. 2006–Aug. 2007
  - Research Assistant, Department of English, Univ. of Washington 2006–2007;
    - Searched historical news about South Africa in US black newspapers; Oct.–Dec. 2008
    - Organized archival materials and create bibliographical files;
    - Search English faculty information in the universities nationwide

- Office Assistant, East Asia Library, Univ. Of Washington Oct. 2006–July  
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  - Assisted in event planning and services;
  - Performed errands that assisted daily functions;
  - Maintained office filing and storage systems;
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- Academic Assistant, the Center for English Studies (CES), Zhengzhou University, China Sept. 2003–  
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  - Edited and published the center brochures;
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  - Assisted in the organization of national and international conferences;
  - Planned project events and scholars visits;
  - Monitored and ordered office supplies;
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- Interpreter and Translator, the “Globalization and Indigenous Culture” International Conference, Zhengzhou University, China June 06–11,  
2004
  
- Translator, *Henan and the World Bilingual Version* (Henan TV International Program), Zhengzhou, China Sept. 2004–  
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- English Hostess, the “Henan Youth ‘CCTV Cup’ English Speaking Contest,” Zhengzhou, China Jan. 17–18,  
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## PUBLICATIONS

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- “Summary of the ‘Globalization and Indigenous Cultures’ International Conference”. *Journal of Zhengzhou University*. Vol. 5, 2004. 2004

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